

# The Legend of the Condor Heroes

Jin Yong

**She Diao Ying Xiong Chuan**  
**Eagle Shooting Hero Book 01**  
by  
**Jin Yong**



**Translators:**

Minglei Huang,  
Foreva,  
Strunf,  
Patudo,  
Taihan,  
Du Gu seeking a win,  
SunnySnow,  
James Worsley,  
Rayon,  
Xuelian,  
Xfiberloss,  
Hugh (aka IcyFox),  
William Lee Chong Beng,  
Daniel Shultz,  
Bluebook,  
Owbjhx,  
Gimel Gimeno,  
Frans Soetomo

**Editors:**

James Gataiant,  
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Additionally, I would note that the work involved goes far beyond just translation.

Chinese cannot simply be directly translated to English, so am grateful for the notes explaining idioms in addition to notes on geography, culture and historical context.

## Other Translations

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<http://wuxiasociety.com>

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If you or a friend would like to help, please get in touch at [N1ghtT1iger71@gmail.com](mailto:N1ghtT1iger71@gmail.com)

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# Chapter 1 - Incident in the Blizzard

Translated by Minglei Huang



*The Taoist suddenly let out a huge laugh as his right palm rose; fast as lightning it struck the middle of the spear. 'Crack!' Yang Tiexin felt his*

*hand go numb and hastily let go, the spear fell  
onto the snowy ground.*

Day in and day out, day after day, the Qiantang River majestically winds through and around Ox Village, near the city of Linan, on its journey toward the sea. On the shores there stood thirty or so tallow trees, leaves red like fire, yet another sign that it was now August. The wild weeds and grass around the village had just started to turn yellow. The sun shone down at a low angle on the grass, adding even more to their bleakness. Underneath two giant pine trees there gathered a group of villagers; the crowd included both men and women along with more than ten children. All of them were listening to a thin old man, giving him their complete attention.

The old man was about fifty or so, the green robe that he was wearing had been washed to a bluish-gray. He banged two pieces of wood together a couple of times, with the little bamboo stick in his left hand he started to beat on a little drum to keep pace. He started to sing: "The peach blossoms without fail, vast unused fields feeding the crows. After the soldiers by the well, families gather in sorrow."

The old man banged the drum with the stick a couple of times more, and then continued: "Old Man Yie had a wife, a son, and a daughter. They lost each other when the Jin invaded. Finally, after many hardships and much difficulty, they were able to get back together. They returned to their home to find that the Jin soldiers had burned it to the ground. They had no choice but to head off to Bianliang (modern day Kaifeng, capital of North Song). 'The heavens produce unexpected storms, people have unforeseen misfortunes'. As soon as the four of them got to Bianliang, they ran into a troop of Jin soldiers. The leader of the soldiers looked down and saw that Young Miss Yie was quite beautiful; he jumped down from his horse, and grabbed her.

With a laugh, he threw her onto his saddle and said: 'Pretty little girl, you are going to go home with me.' How could young Miss Yie agree? She struggled with all her might. The leader yelled out: 'If you don't stop struggling, then your family will die!' He picked up his 'wolf fang' club and smashed it down on her brother's head."....'The nether world gains a new ghost, the real world loses one more soul.'

"Old Man Yie and his wife fell onto their son's body and started to cry their hearts out. That Jin soldier lifted up this 'wolf fang' club twice more and took care of them. Young Miss Yie did not cry, she simply said: 'Sir, please stop killing people. I'll go with you.' This made the soldier extremely happy. Just as he let his guard down, Young Miss Yie suddenly grabbed the saber at his waist, pulled it out, and thrust at his heart. It looked like she was about to avenge her family's death; but alas it was not to be. That soldier had much experience on the battlefield; with out thinking, he merely pushed her forward very naturally, sending Young Miss Yie to the ground. He had just enough time to say: 'Little bitch!' But Young Miss Yie has already brought the blade to her neck. Poor girl: 'With a flower's beauty and the moon's grace, such a sweet soul dying sadly so young.'"

He alternated between talking and singing. Every single one of the villagers was now sighing in sadness and rage. The man continued: "Dear audience members, as the saying goes: 'Treat others with an honest heart, hold your head up on high with pride. If evil deeds go unpunished, only the evil will survive.' The Jin has conquered half of our Great Song, killing, burning, raping and pillaging; not an evil deed left undone. Yet no punishment whatsoever seems to be forthcoming. Our Great Song's officials are responsible for this. China has plenty of healthy and available soldiers; yet every time we go up against the Jin

armies, all they do is turn around and run, leaving us peasants behind to suffer. There are stories, like the one about Young Miss Yie and her family, by the thousands north of the river. Living here south of the river is truly like being in heaven on earth, but we fear the day the Jin soldiers come invading. 'Rather be a dog in peace, than a man in troubled times!' My name is Zhang Shiwu, thanks everyone for listening to the story of 'Miss Yie, the Young Martyr'." After banging the drum several more times, he held up a tray.

Many of the villagers placed a coin or two in the pan, which quickly filled up. Zhang Shiwu thanked the villagers and gathered the sixty or seventy coins into his travel bag. He got up and started to walk off.

A young man of around twenty years of age walked out from among the villagers. He asked: "Mr. Zhang, did you just come from the north?" The young fellow was very tall and very well built with big eyes and a pair of very bushy eyebrows. Zhang Shiwu answered: "Yes." The young man answered: "Then let's have a couple of drinks. I'll pay, what do you say?" Zhang Shiwu replied: "I dare not receive such a favor as a stranger." The young fellow laughed and answered: "Once we've had a couple of drinks, then we are no longer strangers are we? My surname is Guo, given name Xiaotian" Pointing at a clean, white-faced fellow behind him, he continued: "This here is Yang Tiexin. The two of us were just listening to your story. As expected, it was a good story; but we still have several questions we wanted to ask." Zhang Shiwu replied: "No problem, no problem. To run into the two of you today is probably fate doing its work." Guo Xiaotian led Zhang Shiwu to one of the small wine shops in Ox Village and sat down at one of the tables.



The owner of this little wine shop is a cripple. Supported by two crutches, he slowly brought out two jugs of wine, a plate of peas, a plate of salted peanuts, a plate of dried bean curd, and a plate with three salted eggs. Afterwards he sat down on the stool by the door and stared at the setting sun, not even glancing at the three men.

Guo Xiaotian poured the wine and made Zhang Shiwu down two bowls before he began: "Here in the country, we only get to buy meat on the 2nd and the 16th, so we don't have any meat to go down with the wine. Please forgive us." Zhang Shiwu replied: "At least we've got wine, can't complain about that. From your accents, seems like you two are from up north." Yang Tiexin answered: "We are both from Shandong province. We moved away three years ago because we couldn't stand the Jin running loose around there. When we arrived, we fell in love with the people here and settled down. Just now you were saying that us living here south of the river is like living in heaven itself, fearing only an invasion by the Jin. Do you really think that the Jin will invade?"

Zhang Shiwu sighed: "Gold and silver could literally cover the ground and there are beautiful women every which way you look; such is the richness and enchantment of the south. There isn't a day that passes without the Jin thinking about invading. But the final decision about the invasion of the Jin is not made by the Jin, but is made by the Imperial Court of our Great Song in Linan!" This took both Guo Xiaotian and Yang Tiexin by surprise. They asked as one: "Why do you say that?"

Zhang Shiwu continued: "We Han Chinese outnumber the Nuzhen by more than one hundred to one. If only the Imperial Court started using honest and loyal men. With one hundred of us going up against one of them, how could the Jin army win? The northern half of our country was

literally handed over to the Jin in the past by Hui Zong, Qin Zong, and Gao Zong. Those three emperors, from grandfather to grandson, trusted and used corrupt officials, oppressed the masses, and then they either killed or somehow got rid of all the generals that were fighting the Jin. Such a beautiful land, and they literally put it right into the hands of the Jin. Of course the Jin people respectfully accepted it. If the Imperial Court continues to do what it did then, trusting and using corrupt officials, then it is as if they are kneeling on the ground asking the Jin army to come. How could the Jin refuse?" After hearing that, Guo Xiaotian couldn't help but to slam his hand down onto the table in rage. All of the bowls, plates, and chopsticks on the tables jumped from the impact.

Zhang Shiwu continued: "Thinking back, Hui Zong was all set on trying to live forever and become immortal. He was surrounded by corrupt and useless officials: Zai Jing and Wong Yu only knew how to raise taxes and skim off the top. Tong Guan and Liang Shichen were eunuchs that only knew how to suck up. Gao Qiu and Li Bangyan only knew how to lie around and get girls for the emperor. The emperor did not attend to official matters at all; if he wasn't going off to visit monks to ask for guidance, then he was traveling around in search of rare and interesting looking rocks. Once the Jin came, he became a turtle, hiding in his shell and passing the throne to his son, Qin Zong. At that time Li Gang was defending the capital Bianliang and fought off the Jin army. But who would think that Qin Zong would believe some rumors that were started by corrupt officials and dismiss Li Gang. On top of that, he did not replace Li Gang with another experienced and able general. Instead he put the defense of the capital in the hands of a self-proclaimed "Ambassador from the Gods" named Gao Zong and asked him to invite the Army of Heaven to defend the city. The Army of Heaven did not show up. How could we not lose the

capital? At last both Hui Zong and Qin Zong were captured by the Jin army. These two fools had it coming and got what they deserved. But they also brought disaster to millions of Chinese peasants who did nothing to deserve it."

Guo Xiaotian and Yang Tiexin were just getting madder and madder. Guo Xiaotian said: "We have all heard about the capture of the emperors, and the disgrace of the year of Jing Kang, many times. We have also heard about the 'Army of Heaven' talk before, but we just thought it was a joke or some unfounded rumor. Could this possibly be true?" Zhang Shiwu answered: "Absolutely true." Yang Tiexin added: "Afterwards Lord Kang declared himself emperor in Nanjing. He had under him such able and loyal generals as Yue Fei and Han Shizhong. If he had immediately attacked north, although he might not have reclaimed all the lost lands, he would have had no problem recapturing the capital Bianliang. But that hated traitor Qing Hui only wanted to negotiate; he did an about face and killed our beloved General Yue." [Note: the year of Jing Kang translates to A.D. 1127.] Zhang Shiwu poured a bowl of wine for all three of them and downed his bowl in one gulp. He went on: "Beloved General Yue once said these two lines: 'Only aspire to eat Tatar flesh, and chat away while drinking Hun's blood.' This poem conveyed what is in the heart of every Chinese. Ay! This traitor Qing Hui is awfully lucky. It's a shame that we were born 60 years too late." Guo Xiaotian asked: "What do you mean?" Zhang Shiwu replied: "Then you two heroes would go into Linan and kill this traitor. Then the three of us would eat his flesh and drink his blood and there would be no more need for us to come here to eat peas and drink cold wine anymore!" All three of them laughed heartily at that comment.

Yang Tiexin noticed that the jug of wine had been emptied and ordered another one. The three of them just sat there

cursing Qing Hui. The cripple placed another dish of peas as well as a dish of peanuts on the table. Hearing the three men's spirited cursing of Qing Hui, he suddenly let out a rather loud snort.

Yang Tiexin turned to him and asked: "Qu San, what's the matter? You don't think we are wrong to curse at Qing Hui do you?" Qu San, the cripple, answered: "Good cursing! Great cursing! There's nothing wrong with that. It is just that I have heard that Qing Hui wasn't the chief culprit in killing Yue Fei in order to negotiate peace." The three men asked in surprise: "Qing Hui wasn't the main culprit? Then who was?" Qu San replied: "Qing Hui was the Chancellor; whether or not peace was negotiated he still was and would keep on being Chancellor. But our beloved General Yue only wanted to destroy the Jin and bring back the two emperors Hui and Qin. Once those two emperors return, how do you suppose Emperor Gao Zong was going to keep his crown?" As soon as he finished saying what he said, he turned around and struggled back to the stool, and returned to staring at the sky as if in a trance. Qu San's face looked no older than twenty something, yet he was hunched over, with traces of white in his hair. From the back, he looked like an old man.

Zhang Shiwu and the two men looked at each other in silence. After a while, Zhang Shiwu spoke up: "That is so true! Sir, you have really hit on something! The real culprit behind the killing of our beloved General Yue could very well not be Qing Hui, but Emperor Gao Zong. This Emperor Gao Zong was shameless to begin with, he definitely could do something like that!"

Guo Xiaotian asked: "Is he really that shameless?" Zhang Shiwu replied: "Back when the beloved General Yue had just beaten the Jin army in several battles in a row, along with the rebellion of our patriotic brothers in the north, we

had the Jin army against the wall. The Tatars were just beginning to panic wondering what to do, when suddenly Gao Zong sent them a letter of surrender and asked for peace negotiations. Naturally the Jin Emperor was ecstatic, but he replied: 'There will be no peace negotiations unless Yue Fei is killed.' So Qing Hui went about his evil plan and our beloved General Yue was killed in the Pavilion of Changes. The beloved General Yue was killed November of the 11th year of Zhao Xing. One month later, peace was agreed upon. The boundary between Song and Jin was drawn at the River Huai and Emperor Gao Zong called himself a subject of the Jin Emperor. How do you think the letter of surrender was written?" Yang Tiexin answered: "Shamelessly, of course."

Zhang Shiwu replied: "Of course! I happen to know what was written in the letter. It read: 'Your humble subject asks for forgiveness and mercy. If received, your subject will be forever grateful; our humble sons and descendants will forever be of service to your majesty. Your humble subject also swears to give yearly tribute in the amount of two hundred fifty thousand taels of silver and two hundred fifty thousand bolts of silk. Not only did he sell himself as a servant, but all of his descendants as well. Him becoming a servant is really no big deal, but is that not like saying that every Chinese is their servant as well?"

Bang! Guo Xiaotian slammed down hard onto the table again, this time tipping one of the bowls over, spilling wine all over the table. In anger, he shouted: "Shameless! Disgraceful! How did this sorry excuse of a man ever become an emperor?"

Zhang Shiwu continued: "When our nation heard about this treaty, there was not a person on the street who was not enraged. Those Chinese people north of the River Huai were especially grief stricken because they saw that our



country is no longer whole. Gao Zong, knowing that his seat on the throne is secured, immediately rewarded Qing Hui for his 'meritorious service'. Qing Hui was already Lord of Lu, and now Gao Zong added the title of Grand Marshall to his name, giving him almost supreme power under the emperor. Xiao Zong succeeded Gao Zong, and Guang Zong succeeded him; all the while the Jin are still controlling half of China. Now Emperor Qin Yuan has succeeded Guang Zong. He has been on the throne for 5 years now, mostly going along with what the Chancellor Han Tuo Zhou says. What is the future going to be like? He...he, it's hard to say, hard to say!" During the last few words, he did not stop shaking his head.

Guo Xiaotian replied: "What's so hard to say about it? This is the countryside and not like Linan where you might get your head cut off! There isn't a person in the world that doesn't call Han Tuo Zhou a crook! If you compare his betraying the country and oppressing the people, the man is practically a sworn brother of Qing Hui!"

Now that they were talking about current affairs, Zhang Shiwu was starting to feel a little tinge of fear and dared not criticize and talk straight from his heart as he did before. He downed another bowl and said: "Thanks to both of you gentlemen for the wine. May I offer a modest word of advice? I know both of you gentlemen are passionate men, but it is still most wise to be cautious in words and deeds so as to avoid any possible calamities. At this point, the most that us normal folk can hope for is to muddle along and do the best that we can. Ay! Just like the saying: "Surrounded by the mountains in the halls, when will the West Lake parties finally go? Southern fragrances intoxicate all, happily mistaking Hangzhou for Bianliang!"

Yang Tiexin asked: "What's the story behind those four lines?" Zhang Shiwu answered: "There is no story. It is just

a saying indicating that the officials of our Great Song dynasty only care about partying and drinking on the shores of the West Lake. They want to pretend that Hangzhou is our capital and never bother thinking about taking back our land and moving back to Bianliang again."

By the time Zhang Shiwu said goodbye he was dead drunk. As he stumbled toward Bianliang, one could hear him muttering to himself the words of "River Soaked in Red" by Yue Fei: "Jing Kang's Disgrace, still fresh in mind; people's hatred, when will it stop? I drive my cart...."

Guo Xiaotian paid the tab and walked home with Yang Tiexin. The two of them lived right next to each other; after walking a short distance, they made it back to their homes.

Guo Xiaotian's wife Li was just chasing a chicken into a little trap. Turning around, she smiled and said: "You two went drinking again? Brother Yang, why don't you and your wife come over for dinner tonight? We are going to cook a whole chicken."

Yang Tiexin smiled back and answered: "Alright, I guess we are going to inconvenience you two once again. We have so many chickens and ducks to waste food on, but we can't part with any of them." Li replied: "Well your wife is just that kind hearted. She says that she raised those chickens and ducks since they were babies; how could she possibly kill them?" Yang Tiexin laughed and replied: "I told her that I would kill them if she can't make herself do it, then she started crying. Ay! What can I do? Tell you what, tonight I'm going to go hunting and we'll invite the two of you over tomorrow night!" Guo Xiaotian cut in: "We are family! Quit talking about who's inviting who and who is not! Tonight we go hunting together!"

At midnight, Guo Xiaotian and Yang Tiexin went into the woods 3.5 li west of the village, hoping to catch a boar or something of that nature. But after waiting for more than two hours, they heard nothing. Just as they were about to lose patience, they suddenly heard faint sounds of metal banging together coming from outside of the woods. They looked at each other, both wondering: "What's going on now?"

At that moment, from afar, there came the sounds of several men shouting: "Where do you think you are going?" "Stop this instant!" Then a shadow jumped into the woods. Guo Xiaotian and Yang Tiexin finally were able to see the person now that he is in the moonlight. The two of them were shocked. For this man was the crippled owner of that wine shop in the village, Qu San. He thrust his left crutch onto the ground, producing a "Zeng sound". His body flew off the ground and behind a tree. This was a display of an incredible level of Qing Gong. Guo Xiaotian and Yang Tiexin looked at each other again in astonishment, both of them thinking: "We had no clue that Qu San's kung fu is this good, and we have been living here for three whole years!" Both of them stayed hidden in the bushes, not daring to move or come out.

Footsteps keep on getting closer until three men had made it to the edge of the woods. They whispered something to each other and started to walk slowly into the woods. All three of them were dressed in military clothing and each of them had a saber in hand. In the moonlight, the sabers gave off a faint green glow. One of them shouted: "Damned cripple! Your old man here can see you, better quickly surrender and come out!" Qu San kept still behind the tree. The three men started waving their swords wildly, swinging and taking a cut at anything in their way. Very slowly, the three of them got closer and closer. Suddenly there came a

faint thump. Qu San had thrust his right crutch out from behind the tree, hitting one of the men squarely on his chest. That man gave out a muffled groan before flying backwards and falling on the ground. The other two men immediately began to hack at Qu San.

Qu San gave his right crutch a push and jumped several feet to the left, avoiding the sabers. His left crutch immediately went straight for one of the men's face. The man's kung fu was not that bad either; he tried to parry the crutch with his saber. Qu San did not wait for the two to meet before withdrawing his crutch to support himself again. His right crutch came swinging in at the other man's waist. He used his crutches with great speed and quickness. Even though he always had to use one of them to support himself, leaving only one to fight with at all times, he was not losing to the men. Guo Xiaotian and Yang Tiexin noticed that he was carrying a huge bundle on his back, seemingly very cumbersome. After some more fighting, one of the sabers came down and hit the bundle. "Dang!" The bundle ripped and the objects inside spilled onto the ground. Qu San took advantage of his temporary distraction and smashed down hard on the head of the man with his crutch. The man fell onto the ground without so much as a whimper. The only man left was by now scared to death; he turned around and started to run. Qu San took out something from his bosom and raised his arm very quickly. A ball-like object flew through the air in the moonlight, followed by a muted thump as the object hit the back of the man's head. The man let out a ghastly scream and dropped his saber as his arm started to swing wildly out of control. Slowly, he fell back and crumpled to the ground. After a couple of twitches, he stopped moving.

Guo Xiaotian and Yang Tiexin had just witnessed Qu San kill three men in succession while displaying a level of kung fu

that neither one of them had ever seen before. Both of their hearts were racing, afraid to even breath too loudly, for both of them were thinking the same thing: "He'd just killed government officials; that is a huge crime. We don't stand a chance if he finds us here and wants to kill us to keep this quiet."

Qu San turned around and slowly spoke: "Brother Guo, Brother Yang, you can come out now!" Once the two of them got over their shock, they had no choice but to step out of the bushes, although both of them were holding their pitchforks rather tightly. Yang Tiexin snuck a look over at Guo Xiaotian and the pitchfork in his hand and took two extra steps. Qu San smiled: "Brother Yang, your Yang Family Lance Technique (Yang Jia Qiang Fa) can be used with a pitchfork, but your sworn brother uses a pair of short halberds and the pitchfork does not fit his skills, so you step up in front of him. Such righteousness...such friendship!" Yang Tiexin, hearing Qu San spell out exactly what he was thinking, suddenly felt very exposed and couldn't decide what to do. Qu San continued: "Brother Guo, let's say you had your double halberd in hand. Do you think the two of you together can beat me?"

Guo Xiaotian shook his head: "No, we can't. The two of us must have been blind, living here together with you for all these years and not even noticing that you knew kung fu, let alone were a master."

Qu San shook his head and sighed: "I can't even use my legs, how can I be considered a master?" As if his spirits were waning, he continued: "Before I lost their use, would I have had so much trouble with several armed guards? Ay! I'm useless now! Useless!" Guo Xiaotian and Yang Tiexin glanced at each other, not sure how, or should they, dare to respond. Qu San continued: "Would you two help out this cripple and bury these three bodies?" The two of them



glanced at each other again, Yang Tiexin answered: "Alright!"

The two of them dug a big hole using their pitchforks and tossed the three bodies in. While they were moving the last body, Yang Tiexin notices that part of the black object was still sticking out of the back of the man's head. He gave it a good tug with his right arm and pulled it out. Turned out it was an Eight Diagram throwing weapon made out of iron, he wiped the blood off on the body and handed it back to Qu San. [The Eight Diagram is made of eight combinations of three whole or broken lines used in religious, mostly Taoist, ceremonies. The eight combinations usually surround a yin-yang symbol. The flag of South Korea is very similar except it has only four of the eight diagrams.]

Qu San took the Eight Diagram weapon and said: "So sorry for troubling you." He puts the Eight Diagram weapon back into his pocket. He then laid the piece of cloth that used to be his bundle onto the ground and started to put the objects that were scattered on the ground back into it. Guo Xiaotian and Yang Tiexin finished putting dirt back into the hole, turned around and saw three rolled up paintings on the ground as well as many other bright and shiny metal objects. Qu San left out a golden jug and a golden bowl. After putting everything else back in the bundle, he held those two things up to Guo Xiaotian and Yang Tiexin, saying: "These things were stolen by me from the Royal Palace in Linan. The emperor has done enough harm to the peasants; taking a little bit of what he stole from them isn't really a crime. Consider these two things a present from me."

The two of them couldn't believe that he was actually brazen enough to break into the Royal Palace and steal. Neither one of them dared to accept his gifts.

Qu San said in a stern voice: "Are you guys afraid to accept, or do you two not want to?" Guo Xiaotian replied: "The two of us did nothing to deserve such gifts and that's why we can't accept them. As for what happened tonight, you don't have to worry about a thing brother, neither one of us is going to let this secret get out." Qu San replied: "Hmph! Why should I be worried about you two leaking this secret? I know all about you two and your backgrounds; why else would I let you two leave here alive? Brother Guo, you are the descendant of Guo Sheng, one of the heroes of the Water Margins of Mount Liang. You use the halberd skill that is taught in your family, only the halberd is short instead of long, and has two blades instead of one. Brother Yang, your ancestor is Yang Zaixin, one of the generals who served under the beloved General Yue. You two are descendants of two patriotic heroes. When the Jin army conquered the North; you two began wondering the martial world and became martial brothers. And then the two of you moved to Ox Village together. Am I right so far?"

[Note: Those familiar with Heroes of the Water Margins should remember two characters that used halberds that are always together: Lu Meng and Guo Sheng. The nickname of Lu Meng was "Little Vassal" while Guo Sheng's was "Benevolent Aristocrat". They joined the rebellion at the same time and were always deployed in battle in pairs. The two of them even died together, smashed by rocks while attacking a higher position during the effort to quell the Rebellion of Fang La, who is the head of the Ming Cult mentioned later on in this novel and in Heaven Sword and Dragon Saber.]

The two of them, now knowing that Qu San knew their pasts inside out, were even more shocked. All they could do was nod.

Qu San continued: "Guo Sheng and Yang Zaixin were both rebels before going over to the government's side to fight for the Great Song Empire. Both of them have stolen from the thieving government. So tell me, are you two going to accept my gifts or not?" Yang Tiexin thought to himself: "If I refuse, then it will surely offend him." So he took the gifts from Qu San's hands and said: "We are very grateful for this. Thanks."

Qu San was pleased by this; he picked up the bundle and put it back onto his back. Turning around he said: "Time to go home." The three of them walked side-by-side out of the woods. Qu San said: "I got a couple of prize pieces tonight; two paintings by this Emperor Dao Jun and a sheet of his writing showing off his calligraphy as well. This fellow is no emperor, but his Red Green Plume and Thin Gold Form is indeed supreme in the world."

The other two men had no idea what in the world "Red Green Plume" or "Thin Gold Form" is, so all they did was nod in agreement. [Red Green Plume is a style of ancient Chinese painting featuring birds and animals with emphasis on the colors of red and green, obviously. Thin Gold Form is a style of calligraphy.]

After walking for a while, Yang Tiexin spoke up: "Earlier today you said that half of our Great Song's land was lost to the hands of Emperor Dao Jun. So what is so good about his paintings or writings? Why would you bother to go to such trouble and take such a big risk as to go into the Royal Palace to steal it?" Qu San smiled: "This is something that I guess you just won't understand." Guo Xiaotian spoke up as well: "If the Emperor Dao Jun can be so good at painting and writing, he must be pretty smart. It's pity that he does not concentrate on being a good ruler. When I was little my dad told me that a person, no matter what he does, must concentrate on doing one thing. If he tries to learn a little

bit here, do something there, in the end he will get nothing accomplished."

Qu San answered: "For a normal person, this is true. But in this world there is someone who is a genius at everything. From language to kung fu; including writing, painting, music, and Go [Weiqi]; from math to military tactics; even medicine, astrology, and the five elements; there is not a thing that he does not understand, not a thing he has not mastered. It's just that you guys won't ever meet him." He looked up at the waning moon, and let out a long sigh.

Under the moonlight, Guo Xiaotian and Yang Tiexin suddenly noticed tears on Qu San's face. When the two of them got home, they buried the two golden objects deep within their backyard, not even telling their wives about it. After that night the two of them acted as if nothing had happened; they lived off their farms and whatever they caught and when there was spare time they practiced their kung fu. Even when by themselves, neither ever brought up what had happened that night. The two of them still visited the little wine shop occasionally for a couple jugs of wine. Qu San still served the wine along with some peas, peanuts, and other snacks that helped the wine go down. Afterwards he always went and sat down by the door and went off into his own little world, lost in his thoughts. It was as if that night had never happened. The only difference was that when Guo Xiaotian and Yang Tiexin look at Qu San, their eyes were filled with respect.

Autumn slowly gave way to winter; the days just keep getting colder and colder. One night, with the cold north wind blowing, it started to snow. The day after that it continued to snow even more. The whole sky was filled with snowflakes and the ground looked like it was covered with precious jade, white as far as the eye could see. Yang Tiexin told his wife that tonight he is going to get some wine and

food so that they can invite his sworn brother and his wife over so all of them can have a nice dinner and enjoy the snow. After lunch, he grabbed two big gourds and went off to the wine shop to get some wine. When he got there, he noticed that the door was shut tight; even the wine shop sign was taken down.

Yang Tiexin knocked on the door a couple of times and shouted: "Brother Qu San, I'm here to buy three liters of wine." No response came. After waiting a bit, he called out again and still no response came. He walked over to a window and looked inside, everything in the room is covered in a layer of dust. He thought to himself: "I haven't come here for several days; turns out that Qu San hasn't been here for several days as well. I hope nothing's happened." So he had to brave the blizzard and walk to the wine shop 5 li away in Red Plum Village to get the wine as well as a chicken. When he got back he killed the chicken and gave it to his wife to take care of the rest. His wife's surname is Bao, and her given name was Xiruo. She's the daughter of a teacher at the private school in Red Plum Village. They have been married for a little under two years now. She put the chicken along with some cabbage, bean curd, and thin noodles made from bean starch (fen si) into a big pot. While the pot is boiling on top of a fire, she cut a plate of cured meat and cured fish. At dusk, she went over to the Guos' and invited them over for some wine, food and to enjoy the snow.

Guo Xiaotian happily came over. His wife Li was not feeling very well for the last couple of days because of her pregnancy. She had been throwing up anything she eats, so she decided not to come over. Li's given name is Ping. She and Bao Xiruo are like sisters and the two of them chatted for a long time. Only after making her a pot of tea did she finally return home. When she got back she saw that the

two men had already moved the charcoal stove onto the table to keep the wine warm. The two of them had already started.

Guo Xiaotian said: "Sister, we weren't patient enough to wait for you. Please come and join us." The two men has always gotten along and both are men of character, add that to the fact that in the country nobody really cares about the rules regarding men and women gathering together. Bao Xiruo smiled and nodded, putting some more charcoal onto the stove; she picked up another bowl for the wine and sat down beside her husband. She noticed that there are hints of anger on both men's faces; she smiled and asked: "Something wrong again? What's gotten the two of you so angry?" Yang Tiexin answered: "We were just talking about the stuff that goes on in the Imperial Court in Linan."

Guo Xiaotian added: "I was at the Joyful Rain Pavilion, the tea house at the head of the Tranquility Bridge, yesterday when I heard some people talking about that bastard, Chancellor Han Tuo Zhou. It didn't sound like they were making the stuff up either. One man said that no matter which official is filing a report, if the report does not have the words: 'Also present this -whatever - to the Chancellor', this bastard Chancellor does not even give the report another glance!" Yang Tiexin sighed: "When you have this kind of emperor, you'll get this kind of chancellor. When you have this kind of chancellor, then you'll get these kinds of officials. Big Brother Huang, who lives outside of Gushing Gold Gate of Linan, told me this story. One day he was cutting trees for firewood at the side of the mountain, when he suddenly saw a bunch of soldiers protecting a crowd of officials coming his way. It turned out that Chancellor Han Tuo Zhou was taking a sight seeing trip with all his underlings. He kept on minding his own business and went

on cutting his trees. Suddenly he heard Han Tuo Zhou sighing and say: 'The bamboo fences and thatched cottage here really do make an extraordinary country scene. Pity it's missing the sounds of chickens crowing and dogs barking.' Soon after he said this, there suddenly came barking from the bushes." Bao Xiruo laughed a little: "That little dog really knew how to please." Yang Tiexin answered: "It sure did, after barking for a bit, it jumped out of the bushes. What kind of dog do you suppose it was? Turns out it was our dignified and honorable Magistrate from the city of Linan, His Excellency Zhao!" Bao Xiruo doubled over with laughter. Guo Xiaotian observed: "This little dog act by His Excellency Zhao has probably insured that he will be promoted very quickly." Yang Tiexin answered: "Of course, it's only natural."

The three of them drank for a while. The snow outside was coming down even harder, but with some wine in their bellies, all three of them felt very warm and cozy. Suddenly, from the east, there came the sound of footsteps on the snowy road. The footsteps were very rapid. The three of them looked out and saw a Taoist priest.

The Taoist priest is wearing a bamboo hat and a cape, but snow covered his body. There was a sword on his back and the yellow tassel hanging off the handle of the sword swung back and forth in the wind. Snow filled the sky, and a lonely figure was walking in the snow; such a grand and gallant scene. Guo Xiaotian spoke up: "This Taoist knows quite a bit of kung fu, he looks like a real man of honor." Yang Tiexin replied: "That's right. Let's invite him in for a couple of drinks and make friends with him." Both men loved to make new friends, so they both stood up and stepped outside. They noticed that the Taoist was already past them by more than two zhangs [1 zhang = 3.3 meters / approx 11ft] even

though he is only walking. Such levels of qing gong [lightness kung fu] are rarely heard of in the world.

The two of them looked at each other in astonishment. Yang Tiexin yelled out: "Reverend, please stop!" The Taoist turned around and nodded at Yang Tiexin. Yang Tiexin continued: "With such weather outside, Reverend, why don't you come inside and drink a couple of bowls to warm up."

The Taoist sneered and in an instant arrived in front of them. Face full of disdain, he asked coldly: "You want me to stop, what for? Be frank and tell me!"

Yang Tiexin thought the Taoist's rudeness was completely uncalled for, so he just lowered his head and didn't bother to answer. Guo Xiaotian cupped his fist and replied: "The two of us were just sitting by the fire keeping warm and drinking wine when we saw the Reverend walking alone in the snow. So we boldly asked Reverend to join us, please forgive us for our offenses." The Taoist rolled his eyes and said rather loudly: "Alright, alright! If you want to drink, then let's drink!" And he walked through the door.

This made Yang Tiexin even madder, he grabbed the Taoist's left wrist, and with a pull he shouted: "You still haven't told us how to address the Reverend." Suddenly he felt as if he was grabbing onto a slippery fish rather than a hand as the Taoist's hand escaped his grasp. He knew he was in trouble and tried to back away; but before he could a pain shot through his wrist as the Taoist grabbed it. It was as if he was cuffed, and feeling both enormous pressure and heat, he hurriedly tried to struggle out of the Taoist's grasp. His entire right arm felt lifeless and weak, and his wrist was in great pain.



Guo Xiaotian knew, judging from his blood red face, his adopted brother was getting the worst of it. He just wanted to make an acquaintance and wanted to avoid offending the Taoist; or anyone in the martial world for that matter. So he spoke up: "Reverend, please sit here." The Taoist sneered a couple of times more and let go of Yang Tiexin. He walked to the center of the room and sat down with a rather arrogant manner before saying: "The two of you are obviously from Shangdong, yet are here pretending to be farmers. It's a pity that your accents are still obviously the Shangdong accent. Why would a peasant know any kung fu anyway?"

Yang Tiexin felt both embarrassed and angry as he walked into the backroom. He took out a small dagger from the drawer and hid it in his shirt before walking back out again. He poured out three bowls of wine and toasted one for himself, all the while not saying a word.

That Taoist just stared at the snow outside of the house with an arrogant look on his face, not drinking any wine nor saying anything. From the hostility on the Taoist's face, Guo Xiaotian figured that he is suspicious of trickery in the wine. So he took the bowl of wine in front of the Taoist and drank it. Then he said: "Wine gets cold very quickly. Reverend, let me get another warm one for you." He poured another bowl for the Taoist, which the Taoist drank down in one gulp. Afterwards the Taoist said: "Even if there were knockout drugs in the wine, it wouldn't affect me." Yang Tiexin finally had about all he could take: "We nicely invited you to come and have a drink with us, why would we try to harm you? If you plan to keep talking to us in such a manner, then please leave now! It's not like we had sour wine and rotten food that we can't get rid off!"

The Taoist ignored him and grabbed the wine gourd. Pouring and drinking, he downed three bowls in a row.

Then he suddenly took off his bamboo hat and cape and threw them on the floor. Guo Xiaotian and Yang Tiexin looked him over carefully. The Taoist is about thirty or so, squared faced with slanted eyebrows and a hint of redness. His eyes were bright and piercing. Next he untied the leather bundle on his back and threw it on the table. Immediately, Guo Xiaotian and Yang Tiexin jumped up. Because from the leather bundle rolled out a bloody human head!

Bao Xiruo screamed in fear and ran into the back room. Yang Tiexin felt his chest to make sure the dagger was in place. The Taoist gave the leather bundle a shake and two more bloody objects fell out: a heart and a liver. From the looks of them they are probably not a pig's heart and pig's liver, but very likely human. Yang Tiexin shouted: "Taoist bastard!" as he took out the dagger and thrust it towards the Taoist's chest.

The Taoist snickered: "Eagle Talon. So you want to fight now?" He lightly hit Yang Tiexin's wrist with his left hand. Yang Tiexin felt a numbing pain in his wrist as his fingers lost all their strength. Before he knew it, his dagger had been taken away.

Guo Xiaotian was shocked to see all this. He knows that his adopted brother is the descendant of a renowned hero and, from their daily sparring, knows his family's kung fu is slightly superior to his own. But seemed as though he was nothing in front of this Taoist; the move that he just pulled off was obviously the 'Bare Hand Seizes Blade', was a skill that he had only heard off in the martial world. He immediately picked up the wooden bench that he was sitting on, waiting to block the dagger when the Taoist inevitably stabbed his sworn brother.

But the Taoist completely ignored them. He just wildly cut the human heart and liver to pieces with the dagger. Suddenly, he let out a huge roar, so loud that it rattled the tiles on the roof. He lifted up his right hand and brought it down hard, so hard that the contents on the table jumped at the impact. The two men looked over and saw he had just smashed the head's skull bones to smithereens; even the middle of the table was cracked. The two of them were still recovering when the Taoist shouted: "Shameless scoundrels, the Reverend will today have to really break the no-killing rule!"

Yang Tiexin couldn't get any madder; he grabbed the iron spear that was leaning against a corner of the room and jumped outside. He shouted back: "Come on! Let's teach you a lesson in the art of the 'Yang Family Spear'!" The Taoist snickered a bit: "You think you are worthy enough to use the 'Yang Family Spear' based on all this fake bravado?" He walked out of the door as he was finishing the sentence.

Seeing the situation deteriorate to this point, Guo Xiaotian ran back to his house and got his double halberds. When he got back the Taoist was still standing there with his sword still in its sheath and his sleeves flapping noisily in the wind. Yang Tiexin yelled out: "Unsheathe your sword!" The Taoist replied: "Even if the two of you come at me together, I would still fight you with my bare hands."

Yang Tiexin made a gesture signaling that he is about to start and followed it with a 'Poisonous Dragon Coming Out from the Cave'. The red tassel on his spear shook, creating a huge flash of red heading towards the heart of the Taoist. The Taoist was briefly surprised and praised: "Excellent!" His body went along with the spear and dodged to the left. His left palm spun around and came up to meet the spearhead in an attempt to grab it.

Yang Tiexin has worked hard with this spear since he was a little kid and had fully received his father's skills. The 'Yang Family Spear' is nothing to scoff at. Years back, Yang Zaixin took a spear and three hundred Song soldiers into battle against forty thousand Jin soldiers at the Little Merchant Bridge. In the battle, they killed more than two thousand Jin soldiers, not to mention one commander of ten thousand men, as well as more than one hundred commanders of one thousand men and one hundred men. Actually, the Jin arrows came flying in like rain; as soon as he was hit by an arrow he would break the wooden part off and keep on fighting. At last his horse got tripped up in mud and he finally gave his life for his country. When the Jin army burned his body, the amount of melted metal from the arrowheads topped an amazing two jins [1kg / 2.2lbs]. This battle shocked and frightened the Jin army and made the 'Yang Family Spear' famous in all of China.

Although Yang Tiexin is not as great as his forefathers, he does almost fully understand the spear skill inside out. So there he is, parrying, thrusting, swinging, flicking, blocking, fending, and obstructing. The point of the spear flashed silver, the tassel blurred red. What a spear skill!

Yang Tiexin pulled out all the stops and his moves were swift and agile, changing and faking as if they were an illusion. But the Taoist's body followed the spear around, easily dodging forward and back, making him almost impossible to hit. After using all seventy-two moves of the 'Yang Family Spear', Yang Tiexin couldn't help but be anxious and upset. He turned around and walked away carrying the spear backwards. As expected, the Taoist started to chase very close behind. Yang Tiexin let out a big shout, held the spear with both hands, suddenly twisted his waist and extended his arms, and thrust the spear back right at the Taoist's face. This move was ferocious, for it is

the move in 'Yang Family Spear' that is used to break an enemy formation and kill enemy generals, called the "Return Horse Spear". Back before Yang Zaixin changed his allegiance to the Song army, when he battled Yue Fei, he used this exact move to kill Yue Fei's younger brother Yue Fan.

The Taoist, seeing that the spears had already arrived in front of him in an instant, couldn't help but praise: "Excellent move!" Smacking his hands together, he was able to clamp onto the spear point. Yang Tiexin gave one mighty push, but spear did not move at all. Shocked, he tried with all his might to pull the spear back. But it seemed as if the spear was caught underneath a mountain, with no chance at all of pulling it out. His face turned red as he tried three times more, but the spear still would not leave the Taoist's hands. The Taoist let out a hearty laugh; suddenly his right palm came up and with the speed of a lightning strike hit the handle of the spear. Yang Tiexin felt the part between the base of his thumb and index finger go numb and immediately released the spear, letting it drop onto the snow covered ground.

The Taoist smiled and said: "You are really using the 'Yang Family Spear'. Sorry for any offense. Please honor me with knowing your surname." Yang Tiexin still hadn't recovered from the shock of all this, so he replied without much thought: "My surname is Yang, given name is Tiexin." The Taoist asked: "Are you related to General Yang, Yang Zaixin?" Yang Tiexin answered: "He's my great grandfather."

The Taoist cupped his fist and saluted: "I mistook the two of you for scoundrels, turns out that you are descendants of patriots, please forgive me. May I be so bold as to ask this gentleman's surname?" Guo Xiaotian answered: "Surname is Guo, given name is Xiaotian." Yang Tiexin added: "He's

my martial brother, he is the descendant of Guo Sheng, one of the Heroes of the Water Margins of Mount Liang." The Taoist replied: "Your humble Taoist acted rashly and rudely, please forgive me." Then he saluted again.

Guo Xiaotian and Yang Tiexin both bowed and cupped their fist and saluted back: "No problem, no problem at all. Would Reverend please come in for three more bowls?" Yang Tiexin quietly picked up his spear. The Taoist smiled and said: "Of course! I just got the urge to drink it up with you two."

Bao Xiruo was worried that her husband might get hurt, so she stood in the doorway anxiously observing. Seeing the three of them stop fighting and become friends, she felt greatly relieved and started to set the table back up.

After the three of them sat down, Guo Xiaotian and Yang Tiexin asked the Taoist for his Taoist name. The Taoist replied: "My name is Qiu Chuji..." Yang Tiexin jumped up and shouted: "Ah Ya!" Guo Xiaotian was shocked as well: "elder 'Eternal Spring' (Chang Chunzi)?" Qiu Chuji smiled and replied: "That's the name that my Taoist friends gave me, I do not dare to claim such a name." Guo Xiaotian replied: "The hero elder 'Eternal Spring' of the Quanzhen Sect, I am honored to make your acquaintance!" The two of them threw themselves onto the floor and saluted.

Qiu Chuji hurriedly helped them up and said while smiling: "I personally killed a traitor today. The government's men were chasing me very closely, and you two gentlemen suddenly invited me in for a drink. This is the capital area and neither of you are normal farmers, so I became suspicious." Guo Xiaotian replied: "This martial brother of mine has always a temper. Before we entered he tried a hand move at Reverend, I think that probably furthered Reverend's suspicion." Qiu Chuji agreed: "How could a normal farmer be that strong? I thought that you two

gentlemen were dogs of the government who were waiting here, undercover, for me. That's why I was so rude, too rash and rude." Yang Tiexin smiled and replied: "Can't blame those who don't know." The three of them laughed heartily. After several rounds of drinks, Qiu Chuji pointed at the head that is now in pieces on the floor: "This man's name is Wang Daokun, a traitor! Last year when the emperor sent him to pay respects to the Jin emperor on his birthday, this man actually started to collude with the Jin in their effort to invade the South. I chased him for ten days before finally getting him." The other two men had long heard in the martial world of elder 'Eternal Spring' Qiu Chuji's amazing kung fu and heroic character. Seeing his patriotism at this moment, killing a traitor for the country, they admired him even more. The two of them seized the opportunity to ask him some questions about kung fu, Qiu Chuji was only too happy to help.

Even though the 'Yang Family Spear' never met an enemy on the battlefield, when going up against a kung fu master, it seemed rather lacking. Although Qiu Chuji's inner and outer kung fu cannot be considered at the highest of levels, they are nevertheless of a very high level, how could Yang Tiexin last umpteen moves against him? It turned out that Qiu Chuji was surprised to see his skills, so he purposely yielded in order to make him use up all seventy-two moves of the 'Yang Family Spear' to make sure that it was authentic. If they were really going at it, Yang Tiexin's spear would have been knocked out of his hand in a few moves. At this point, Qiu Chuji observed that the 'Yang Family Spear' was intended to be used on horseback; if used on foot, then one had to be more creative and imaginative and not use it in a rigid fashion. The two men could not stop nodding upon hearing this. The 'Yang Family Spear' has always been a skill of the Yang males, so even though Qiu Chuji is very knowledgeable, he still did not fully understand the inner

workings of the skill. So he asked Yang Tiexin a few questions about it as well.

The three of them had their ears turn warm from the wine and were really hitting it off. Yang Tiexin suggested: "We two brothers are really fortunate to be able to meet Reverend today. Reverend, why don't you stay a couple of days?"

Qiu Chuji was just going to answer before his face suddenly froze: "Someone is here for me. No matter what happens, you two stay inside and don't come out, understand?" The two men nodded. Qiu Chuji picked up the human head, walked out of the door, jumped up in a tree, and hid among its leaves.

Guo Xiaotian and Yang Tiexin didn't really understand his strange actions, there were no noises whatsoever other than the howling of the wind. After a while, there came faint hoof beats from the west. Yang Tiexin thought: "The priest's ear is incredible." Then immediately his thoughts followed: "This Priest's kung fu is amazing, but compared with Qu San, who would come out on top?" After another while, the hoof beats got closer and closer. Finally, about twenty riders, all dressed in black, appeared out of the flying snow. Galloping, they arrived in front of the door.

The leader of the group suddenly pulled his horse to a stop and yelled out: "The footprints stop here. It looks like there's just been a fight." Several people behind him jumped off their horses and inspected the footprints in the snow.

The head of the pack ordered: "Search the house!" two more men jumped of their horse to knock on the door. Suddenly an object flew from the trees, hitting one of them on the head. The object was thrown with such an incredible



amount of force that it smashed the skull of the man. The other men all started to yell and scream as several men surrounded the tree. One man picked up the object that was thrown and yelled in shock: "It's His Excellency Wang's head!"

The leader pulled out a saber and let out a loud yell. Quickly ten or so men surrounded the tree. He gave out another command and five men raised their bows and shot five arrows toward Qiu Chuji.

Yang Tiexin picked up his spear and was just about to go outside and help when Guo Xiaotian grabbed him and whispered: "Reverend Qiu told us not to go out. Besides, if he starts having trouble with their numbers, then it still won't be too late for us to help." Just as he finished, an arrow came screaming down from the top of the tree. Turned out Qiu Chuji had dodged four of the arrows and caught the last one, and then he just threw the arrow back down like a throwing weapon. With a scream of "Ah!", one of the men in black was hit and fell off his horse. His body rolled into a bush and stopped.

Qiu Chuji pulled out his sword and jumped down. The sword had just started flashing when two men were hit. The leader shouted out: "Bloody Taoist! It's you!" "Sha, sha, sha!" He made three short bows, and then his horse came forth as his saber came slashing through the wind. Qiu Chuji's sword continued to flash in the snow as two more men were hit and fell off their horse. Yang Tiexin was awestruck, knowing that even if he practiced kung fu for 10 more years, he still would not be able to even see such a sword clearly, much less fight back. If Qiu Chuji wasn't holding back just then, he would have been a dead man by now.

Qiu Chuji moved as if carried by the wind and now is fighting the rider with the saber. That man's saber skill was not bad, each move, be it a parry or a slash, came out ferociously. After fighting for a bit more, Guo Xiaotian and Yang Tiexin both figured out that Qiu Chuji was prolonging their duel on purpose so as to use openings and breaks to pick off the other opponents. He was doing this in order to kill every one of the enemy; if the leader was killed, the rest might just turn and run for their lives, making it impossible to kill all of them.

After more fighting, there were only six or seven of them left. The leader knew he was not good enough, so he turned and tried to escape. Qiu Chuji reached out with his left hand and grabbed the horse's tail. With a slight pull, his body jumped off the ground. Before even landing on the back of the horse, his sword had already penetrated the man's back all the way out of his chest. Qiu Chuji threw down the body, grabbed hold of the reins, and started to chase the others. Silver colored iron horse shoes danced in the snow as silver flashes of his sword danced in the air. Amidst the screams, one body followed another onto the ground. Blood stained the ground, that was covered in pure white snow, to a deep red.

Qiu Chuji stopped and looked around. Seeing only several rider-less horses running off, he laughed heartily. Turning to the two men by the door, he waved and said: "How did you men like that?"

Guo Xiaotian and Yang Tiexin had just opened the door and walked out, so they had not completely calmed down from what they just witnessed. Guo Xiaotian asked: "Reverend Qiu, who are these people?" Qiu Chuji replied: "We'll know when we search their bodies."

Guo Xiaotian searched the body of that saber using man and found an official document. It turned out to be an order from that very Magistrate Zhao, who had pretended to be a dog, saying that the Ambassador from Jin has ordered that the Song government troops and Jin troops to work together to catch the man that murdered Wang Daokun as soon as possible. Guo Xiaotian was just about to explode in rage when Yang Tiexin yelled out. In his hand were some tags found on the bodies of some other men, the tags were written in the Nuzhen language. It meant that within this group of men, there were several Jin soldiers.

Guo Xiaotian spoke up: "The enemy soldiers can do whatever they want, including capturing and killing, within our borders, and our Song officials are actually obeying orders from their Ambassador! What kind of world is this?!" Yang Tiexin sighed: "Even the Emperor of Great Song has to refer to himself as an official of the Jin emperor, so it's no surprise that our officials and generals are becoming their servants as well." Qiu Chuji bitterly said: "We priests are supposed to be merciful and benevolent in our hearts and actions. But then we see a bunch of traitors and enemies that do nothing but add to the suffering of our people, and I could never be merciful nor benevolent." The two other men replied at the same time: "You were right to kill them! They deserved to die!"

This small village did not have many people to begin with. Now with the blizzard blowing, nobody was coming out at night. Even if someone witnessed what just happened, they would have ran back home a long time ago. Who had enough guts to come out to inspect and ask questions? Yang Tiexin took out shovels and hoes and the three of them buried all of the bodies in one big grave.

Bao Xiruo picked up a broom and started to sweep all traces of blood on the snow. After a while, the smell of blood

went straight to her stomach. Her eyes went blank for a second as she let out a little moan and sat down on the snow-covered ground. Yang Tiexin was shocked and immediately ran over to help her up, all the while asking over and over: "What's the matter?" Bao Xiruo's eyes were closed and she did not answer. Seeing her white face and feeling her cold hands, Yang Tiexin just got more and more worried.

Qiu Chuji came over, grabbed Bao Xiruo's right wrist, and felt her pulse for a bit. Suddenly he burst out laughing and said: "Congratulations! Congratulations!" Yang Tiexin was quite taken aback and asked: "What?" At this time Bao Xiruo suddenly woke up with a grunt. Seeing the three men standing around her, she can't help but feel a little shy and immediately walked back into the house.

Qiu Chuji said with a smile: "Your wife is pregnant!" Yang Tiexin couldn't quite believe it and asked: "Really?" Qiu Chuji smiled and replied: "Of all the things I learned in my life, I take comfort in saying that I know a little something about only three things. First is medicine, I couldn't master inner strength, but came into contact with a lot of medicinal and herbal knowledge because of that. The second thing is writing a couple of messed up lines of poetry. The little cat-like tricks called kung fu that I know can only be placed third." Guo Xiaotian replied: "Reverend, if your kung fu can only be called 'little cat-like tricks', then we two brothers can only lay claim to 'not even rat-like skills'!" The three of them finished burying the bodies while talking and laughing. After that they went back into the house and started on the food and drinks again. With all the Jin that Qiu Chuji killed today, all of them felt great joy and excitement.

Thinking about his wife's pregnancy, Yang Tiexin could not stop smiling. He thought: "Reverend here knows poetry,

then that means he excels in all facets." So he suggested: "Brother Guo's wife is pregnant as well. Could we bother the Reverend to think of two names?" Qiu Chuji thought for a bit and said: "Brother Guo's child will be called Guo Jing, and Brother Yang's child will be called Yang Kang. It doesn't matter if they are boys or girls, they can still use these names." Guo Xiaotian replied: "Great! Reverend's reminding us two to remember the disgrace of the Year of Jing Kang, the humiliating capture of the two emperors."

Qiu Chuji replied: "That's right." He reached into his shirt, took out two daggers, and put them on the table. The pair of daggers are identical in everyway with a green leather sheath, gold hand guard, and ebony handles. He picked up one of the daggers and carved the words "Guo Jing" on the dagger's handle. Then he carved "Yang Kang" on the handle of the other dagger. He carved with great speed and quickness, faster than most people can write. Before Guo Xiaotian and Yang Tiexin figured out what he was doing, he had already finished carving the words. Smiling, he said: "I do not have anything else worthy with me, only this pair of daggers. Why not leave them for the two kids?" The two men thanked him and took their respective daggers. When the daggers were unsheathed, a sinister coldness came from them. Their blades were obviously very sharp.

Qiu Chuji explained: "This pair of daggers came into my possession by coincidence. Although they are sharp, their small design does not fit me at all. But the kids can use them to protect themselves. Ten years from now, if I'm lucky to be still in this world, I will come to this place again and teach the kids some kung fu. How does that sound?" The two men could not be any happier and thanked him repeatedly. Qiu Chuji concluded: "The Jin are occupying the north and torturing the people there. This situation cannot last long. Gentlemen, please take care of yourselves." He

picked up his bowl of wine and downed it in one gulp. Then he got up and walked out of the door. Guo Xiaotian and Yang Tiexin jumped up to try to invite him to stay. But his steps were fast and steady as he was already very far away.

Guo Xiaotian sighed: "Masters like him are always coming and going like the wind. We were lucky to make his acquaintance today, I was thinking of talking to him and asking for his views a bit more. But alas, it was not to be." Yang Tiexin smiled and replied: "Big Brother, at least Reverend Qiu was able to kill many Jin today and vented some of our anger for us as well." He held up the dagger and unsheathed it again. Gently stroking the blade, he suddenly spoke up: "Big Brother, I have a stupid idea, tell me what you think of it?"

Guo Xiaotian asked: "What is it?" Yang Tiexin explained: "If both our kids are boys, then they will be sworn brothers. If they are girls, then they'll be sworn sisters...." Guo Xiaotian cut in: "And if it is a boy and a girl, then they'll be husband and wife." The two of them grabbed each other's hand and laughed heartily.

Bao Xiruo came back out from the sleeping room, smiled, and asked: "What has made you two so happy?" Yang Tiexin repeated what they just said to her. Bao Xiruo blushed, but she was happy in her heart as well. Yang Tiexin suggested: "Let's trade daggers right now as a pledge to the engagement. If they turn out to be sworn brothers or sisters, we can still switch back. If they are a little couple...." Guo Xiaotian joked: "Then I'm really very sorry, for both daggers would belong to my family then." Bao Xiruo laughed and replied: "You never know, maybe they will both belong to our family instead." So the two men switched daggers right there. Actually, arranging marriages before a child is born happens very often, there was nothing unusual about it.

Guo Xiaotian took the dagger and happily ran back home to inform his wife. When Li Ping heard it she was quite happy as well.

Playing with the dagger and drinking by himself, Yang Tiexin was drunk before he knew it. Bao Xiruo helped her husband onto the bed and collected the dishes and bowls. Noticing that it is quite late, she went out to the backyard and collected the chicken cages. As she was closing the back door, she suddenly saw some drops of blood in the snow just in front of the door. Startled, she thought: "So not all of the blood was taken care off. If some official sees this, then we will all be in trouble." So she hurriedly grabbed a broom and started sweeping.

The drops of blood led all the way to the woods behind the house. There were also traces of someone crawling along in the snow. Bao Xiruo's suspicions rose as she followed the blood trail into the pine trees. She arrived behind an old grave and saw something black curled up on the ground.

Bao Xiruo walked closer for a better look. Turned out it was a corpse. The man was covered in black, obviously one of the men that came for Qiu Chuji earlier. He probably didn't die right away after being wounded and crawled here. She was just about to go wake her husband to take care of this corpse when she suddenly thought: "What if someone came and saw him right at this moment?" So she summoned up her strength and went over to the corpse. She wanted to pull it into a bush close by and then go get her husband. But just as she gave a pull, the corpse suddenly twitched and groaned.

This scared the wits out of her, thinking it was a zombie; she wanted to turn around and run for her life. Yet it was as if her feet were nailed to the ground, she could not move at all. After a long wait, seeing that the corpse did not move

again, she gently nudged it with her broom. The corpse groaned again, but this time much weaker. Only now did she realize that the person was still alive. She looked closer and saw that the back of his shoulder had been hit by a 'wolf fang' arrow. The arrow was embedded deep and the arrow shaft was covered in blood. Snow was still falling and there was already a thin layer of snow on his face. It would only be a little while longer before he is frozen to death.

She had always been kindhearted ever since she was little. If she saw an injured sparrow, frog, or even a bug, she just had to take it home and take care of it until it had fully recovered. Only then would she release it. If for some reason she couldn't nourish it back to health, she would be unhappy for an entire day. This little quirk of hers never changed with her age and led to her house ending up crawling with small critters of many kinds. Her father, being the time-tested country scholar that he was, gave her a name that went along with this personality of hers: Xiruo, meaning weak or compassionate. The Bao family in Red Plum Village had an unusually high number of old roosters and hens. This was because once Bao Xiruo had taken care of a chick; she would never allow it to be killed. If her parents wanted to eat one, they would have to go and buy one at the market. So the chickens that the family raised all lived to a very old age before dying. Because Yang Tiexin loved this flower-like beauty that is his wife, he always went along with whatever she wanted. So naturally, the yard of the Yang house had become a haven for chickens, ducks and other little critters as well. The little chicks and ducklings have slowly grown to be adult chickens and ducks. There weren't any old chickens or ducks because she hadn't been in this household for very long. But if things continued as they were, it would only be a matter of time.



Right now, seeing this man lying in the snow about to die, her kind heart started to react. Even though she clearly knew that this man was not good, she couldn't just watch him bleed and freeze to death. She hesitated for only a second before running back to the house to discuss this with her husband. But Yang Tiexin was deep in sleep because of the wine, no matter what she did he wouldn't wake up.

Figuring that she should save the person first and then worry about the rest, she took out her husband's blood clotting powder. Grabbing a small dagger, some pieces of cloth, and half a jug of warm wine that was on the stove, she ran back to behind the grave. That man was still lying on the ground, not moving. Bao Xiruo helped him sit up and slowly poured the leftover wine in the jug into his mouth. She had been taking care of and curing animals ever since she was little, so she had a little bit of medical knowledge. The arrow had embedded itself deep inside of him, pulling it out might cause blood to shoot out of him and kill him. But if the arrow isn't pulled out, there will be no way to start taking care of the wound. So she gritted her teeth, cut open the flesh around the wound using the dagger, grabbed a hold of the arrow shaft, and gave one hard pull. The man let out a tortured scream and passed out. Blood shot out of the wound as Bao Xiruo's shirt was covered with little specks of blood, but that arrow had been pulled out. Bao Xiruo's heart was beating wildly as she anxiously and hurriedly applied the blood clotting powder onto the wound and firmly bandaged it with the pieces of cloth. After a while, the man slowly began to come around, but was too weak and tired to even make a sound.

Bao Xiruo had been frightened to the point that there was no way for her to gather up enough strength to help move this man. Suddenly an inspiration came to her, she went

back home and grabbed a door plank. She dragged the man onto the door plank and then pulled the door plank along the snow, as if she was pulling a sled. She pulled him back into the house and set him up in the barn. After being fully occupied for so long, only now did she get the chance to calm down. She changed out of her bloodied shirt and washed her hands and face. She poured out a bowl of unfinished chicken soup, grabbed a candle, and went to the barn once again to check on the man. When she arrived the man's breathing was weak but steady. Bao Xiruo felt a little better and started feeding him the chicken soup. The man drank down half a bowl before suddenly breaking out in a violent coughing bout.

Startled, Bao Xiruo held up the candle for a closer look. Under the candlelight, she saw the man's delicate features and rather high bridged nose. He was actually a very handsome young man. Her face suddenly flushed and her left hand shook, disturbing the candleholder and several drops of wax fell onto the man's face.

That man opened his eyes. In front of him was a face as beautiful as a flower, cheeks blushing red, and eyes like twinkling stars, filled with both sympathy and bashfulness. It was as if this was a dream and he couldn't help but become spellbound.

Bao Xiruo whispered: "Feeling any better? Here, drink the rest of this bowl of soup." That man tried to take the bowl in his hands, but he had no strength in his hands whatsoever and almost spilled it on himself. Bao Xiruo immediately grabbed the bowl back. At this time the most important thing is to save a life, so she fed him the soup little by little.

After drinking all of the soup, that man's eyes slowly gained back some life. He stared at her, obviously grateful beyond words. But Bao Xiruo was getting embarrassed by the

stare. So she grabbed some straw, put it on him to keep him warm, and went back into the house with the candle.

She did not sleep well at all for the rest of the night and she had several nightmares in a row. Suddenly she would see her husband spearing that man to death. But then she would see that man killing her husband with a saber and then start to chase her; she was surrounded by darkness and had no where to run or hide. Several times she was frightened awake by her dreams and was covered with a cold sweat. When she woke up in the morning, her husband had already gotten up. Seeing him grinding the head of his spear, her dreams of last night came rushing back into her mind. She anxiously made her way to the barn and pushed open the door. Even more startling, there was nobody in the barn, only a messed up pile of straw. The man had disappeared.

She ran to the backyard and noticed the backdoor was only half-closed. The snow showed the traces of someone crawling and rolling toward the west. She stared at the traces and became lost in thought. After a long while, a gust of wind blew in her face as she suddenly felt a pain in her stomach and her legs felt weak. Sleepy, she walked back to the main room. Yang Tiexin had already made some porridge and put it on the table. Smiling, he said: "See, my porridge isn't that bad after all." Bao Xiruo knew that her husband is being even more considerate because of her condition. She smiled, sat down, picked up the bowl, and started to eat the porridge. She figured that if she told her husband about what happened last night, he would be jealous and angry. He would no doubt chase the man down and kill him. Wouldn't that be the same as her killing the man? So she decided to never mention it ever.

Winter ended and spring returned. In a blink of an eye several months had passed. Bao Xiruo's stomach slowly got

bigger and she began to feel more and more tired. The incident of that night when she saved a man gradually slipped from her memory.

On this particular day, the Yang family had just finished dinner and Bao Xiruo was sitting by a lamp working on a new pair of trousers for her husband. Yang Tiexin was hanging up on the wall the two pairs of straw sandals he just finished. Remembering that he broke the head of the plough while working in the fields earlier that day, he turned to Bao Xiruo and said: "The head of the plough is broken. Tomorrow I'll go to Zhang Mu'Er on the east side of the village and have him add a bit of iron and take care of it." Bao Xiruo replied: "Alright." Yang Tiexin looked at her and said: "I have enough clothing already. Your body is weak and is carrying a baby, you should rest as much as you can. Don't worry about making clothes for me anymore." Bao Xiruo turned her head towards him and smiled, but her hands did not stop. Yang Tiexin walked over and gently took the needle and thread out of her hand. Only then did Bao Xiruo let out a yawn, blew out the lamp, and went to bed.

At midnight, Bao Xiruo was suddenly snapped out of her dreams by the sound of her husband sitting up. Faint sounds of hoof beats could be heard coming from very far away. The sound came from the west. After a while, hoof beats started coming from the east and followed by sounds coming from north and south. Bao Xiruo sat up and asked: "How come there are horses in all four directions?" Yang Tiexin jumped out of the bed and started to put on cloths. Soon, the hoof beats were getting closer from all four directions and the dogs in the village started to bark. Yang Tiexin replied: "We are surrounded!" Shocked, Bao Xiruo asked: "What for?" Yang Tiexin replied: "I don't know." He handed the dagger that Qiu Chuji gave him to his wife and said: "Take this, to protect yourself!" He took down a spear

from the wall and firmly held it in his hands. By now the horse neighs and the human voices from all four directions were loud and chaotic. Yang Tiexin opened up a window and looked outside. A group of soldiers, with torches in hand, had already surrounded the entire village. Seven or eight of them were galloping back and forth on horseback.

The soldiers shouted as one: "Catch the traitors, don't let them get away!" Yang Tiexin thought to himself: "Are they here to catch Qu San? I haven't seen him around recently. Luckily he isn't here, otherwise there is no way he could beat all of these soldiers, no matter how great his kung fu is." Suddenly one of the men on a horse shouted: "Guo Xiaotian, Yang Tiexin. You two traitors come out now and get what's coming to you!"

This shocked Yang Tiexin and Bao Xiruo's face turned white. Yang Tiexin whispered to her: "I don't know what's gotten into the authorities, they only know how to malign us normal citizens. We won't stand a chance with them. The only thing we can do is run for our lives. Don't panic, with this spear of mine, I can assure you that we'll get out of here." His kung fu was good and had made a living in the martial world before. So even though he was in grave danger, he did not panic. He put a bow and arrow bag onto his back and grabbed his wife's right hand.

Bao Xiruo spoke up: "I'll pack." Yang Tiexin replied: "Pack what? We are leaving everything!" Bao Xiruo's heart suddenly trembled as tears rolled down her cheeks. She said in the shaking voice: "What's going to happen to our home?" Yang Tiexin answered: "All we need to do is to survive. We can start another home somewhere else." Bao Xiruo asked: "What about these little chicks and ducklings and cats?" Yang Tiexin sighed: "Silly, why are you still worrying about them?" After a pause, he tried to console

her: "Why would the authorities bother the little chicks, ducklings and cats?"

Just as he finished his sentence, the light from the torches outside fluttered. The soldiers had just lit two thatched cottages on fire. Two more foot soldiers were heading this way with torches to light this house on fire, all the while shouting: "Guo Xiaotian, Yang Tiexin. If the two of you don't come out now, we'll burn all of Ox Village down to the ground!"

Yang Tiexin had about all he could take, so he opened up the door and walked out. He shouted at the top of his lungs: "I am Yang Tiexin! What do you people want?" The two foot soldiers were shocked and they dropped their torches, turned around, and ran back. In the firelight, a man rode forth on his horse and shouted: "Good, so you are Yang Tiexin. Come with us to the magistrate. Seize him!" At once four or five foot soldiers ran up. Yang Tiexin twirled his spear, swung a 'White Rainbow in the Sky' move, and swept three of the soldiers onto the ground. He followed it up with the 'Madly Deafening Spring Thunder' move as he picked up a soldier by the spear shaft and threw him into the crowd. He shouted: "If you want to arrest me, first tell me what crimes I committed."

The man shouted back: "Traitor! How dare you resist arrest?" Even though he was calling him names, he nevertheless feared his foe's courage as well as skill and was afraid to get any closer. Another man on horseback behind him shouted: "Just come with us to the courthouse peacefully, that way there won't be more punishments added to your crimes. We have the official document for your arrest here." Yang Tiexin replied: "Let me see it!" That man replied: "What about the other traitor, Guo Xiaotian?"

Guo Xiaotian stuck half of his body out of a window with his bow and arrow in hand and shouted: "Guo Xiaotian is here!" The arrow was aimed at the man on horseback.

The man's heart felt all fluttery as cold waves of fear washed up his back. He shouted: "Put down your bow, and then I'll read the document to you." Guo Xiaotian viciously shouted back: "Read it now!" He pulled his bow full draw. Seeing that he had no say in the matter, the man brought up the document and read aloud: "Guo Xiaotian and Yang Tiexin of Ox Village of the Prefecture of Linan colluded with traitors and criminals with intentions of wrong doing. Capture them and bring them in to be strictly judged by the law." Guo Xiaotian asked: "Which official issued the order?" The man replied: "Chancellor Han himself."

Both Guo Xiaotian and Yang Tiexin were shocked by this: "What could be so important that Han Tuo Zhou himself got involved? Could it be that Reverend Qiu's actions that night were discovered?" Guo Xiaotian asked: "Who is the plaintiff? Based on what evidence?" That man shouted back: "We only worry about capturing you guys, if you want to plead your case then come to the courthouse with us." Yang Tiexin shouted back: "Chancellor Han only knows how to do harm to us good honest people, everyone knows that! We won't fall for that lie!" The leader shouted in response: "Refusing arrest! That is another crime to your sheet!"

[Actually Han Tuo Zhou is not as bad as portrayed in the book. Between Yue Fei's execution in 1142 and Han Tuo Zhou's ascension as head chancellor in 1206, the Southern Song emperors did not once invade the Jin territories in an attempt to reclaim some lands. Only after Han Tuo Zhou became chancellor was another attempt was made. However, this attempt was poorly planned and general preparations were lacking. On top of that add the internal conflicts within the imperial court, and it is no

surprise that it failed. Ning Zong, the emperor at the time, and a bunch of officials favoring peace executed Han Tuo Zhou and presented his head to the Jin emperor as a show of their willingness for peace. This was the last attempt by the Southern Song dynasty to drive out the Jin. So Han Tuo Zhou was actually a patriot who died for his country instead of how he is portrayed in this book.]

Yang Tiexin turned toward his wife and said: "Quickly put on some more clothes. I'll go get his horse for you. Once I shoot down the leader, the rest of them will panic." The sound of bow being released was followed by a meteor-like arrow hitting the leader's right shoulder. The leader let out an "Ai-Yo!" before tumbling down onto the ground. All the soldiers shouted in surprise. Another official shouted: "Seize them!" All the soldiers came rushing forth. The two men were shooting arrows one after another and in an instant, they had already shot down six or seven soldiers. But there were too many of them and they still managed to charge to the front of both houses.

With a loud shout, Yang Tiexin jumped out of the door with his spear making the soldiers back up in surprise and fear. He jumped to the side of an official that was riding a white horse and thrust the spear at him. The official tried to parry with his spear but the 'Yang Family Spear' was too fast; Yang Tiexin's spear flashed down and hit the official on his leg. He then lifted his spear up and flipped the official off his horse.

Yang Tiexin put his spear shaft on the ground and pushed off, jumping onto the horse. He squeezed his legs, making the horse neigh and gallop towards the house. Yang Tiexin killed a soldier by the door with a thrust, leaned down, extended his arms, grabbed Bao Xiruo, and lifted her up onto the horse as well. He then turned and shouted: "Brother, follow me!" Guo Xiaotian was waving his twin



halberds and protecting his wife as he charged out from the crowd. Seeing the ferocity of the two men, none of the soldiers dared to get any closer. So they started to shoot arrows at them.

Yang Tiexin made his horse run to Li Ping's side and shouted as he jumped off: "Sister, get on!" Li Ping anxiously said: "That won't be any good." Yang Tiexin didn't care what she said and threw her onto the horse. The two sworn brothers followed behind the horse and slowly walked off while battling off the soldiers.

After a bit of walking, they suddenly heard loud shouting coming from ahead as another group of soldiers came charging in. The two men silently groaned. As they were looking for another direction to run, arrows started coming in from ahead. Suddenly, Bao Xiruo screamed: "Ai-Yo!" Her horse was hit by an arrow and it fell over, throwing the two women on its back off. Yang Tiexin said: "Brother, you guard them; I'll go get another horse." He charged toward the crowd of soldiers. Ten or so soldiers lined up, pointed their spears at Yang Tiexin, and let out a yell together.

Seeing the overwhelming number of enemies, Guo Xiaotian thought: "For us two brothers, escaping is not hard. But with enemies in front and behind, there is no way our wives can escape. It is not like we broke any laws, so going to the courthouse in Linan to argue our case is much better than dying here for no reason. When Reverend Qiu Chuji killed all of the men there, not a single one of them got away. Therefore there is nobody to prove we did it, so the court can't say for sure that we were guilty of anything. Besides, the two of us didn't kill any officials or Jin soldiers." So he yelled: "Brother, stop! Let's go with them!" Yang Tiexin was very surprised by this and ran back dragging his spear behind him.

The leader of this group of soldiers ordered the men to stop shooting and surround the two men. Then he shouted: "Throw down your weapons, and your life will be spared."

Yang Tiexin spoke up: "Brother, don't fall for their lies." Guo Xiaotian shook his head for a while and then threw his twin halberds onto the ground. Yang Tiexin looked over at his beloved wife and could not bear the frightened look on her face. He sighed and threw his spear on the ground as well. As soon as both of their weapons fell on the ground, ten or so long spears immediately came and surrounded the four of them. Eight foot soldiers walked up and tied the four of them up with their hands behind their backs.

Yang Tiexin held his head up high and sneered. The leader of the group lifted his horse whip up and smacked Yang Tiexin squarely on his face: "Damn traitor! Do you really want to die?" A welt appeared on Yang Tiexin's face from his forehead all the way down to his neck. In rage, Yang Tiexin replied: "Ok! What is your name?" That official got even madder as his whip came down like rain: "This old man is Duan Tiande! Remember that? When you get to the gates of hell you can tell them all about me!" Yang Tiexin did not back down or flinch as he stood there staring at him. Duan Tiande continued: "I got a knife scar on my forehead and a birthmark on my face! Can you remember all that?" His whip came down again.

Seeing her husband being treated like this, Bao Xiruo cried out while tears rolled down her cheeks: "He's a good man and has done nothing wrong. Why are you... you beating him? Don't... Don't you know anything about justice?" Yang Tiexin suddenly spit at him, hitting him on the face. Furious, Duan Tiande pulled out his saber and screamed: "I'm going to kill you traitor, right now!" He brought his saber up and swung it down. Yang Tiexin sidestepped the strike. The two foot soldiers by him pushed their spears up against his sides

to stop him from moving as Duan Tiande chopped down once again. With nowhere to dodge on the sides, Yang Tiexin could only jump back to avoid the strike. It turned out this Duan Tiande knows a little bit of kung fu, even though he missed again, he immediately thrust his saber forward. The saber he was using was saw-toothed and with his move he sawed a gash on Yang Tiexin's left shoulder. He then immediately followed it with another chop.

Seeing that his sworn brother's life was in grave danger, Guo Xiaotian suddenly jumped up and aimed his feet at Duan Tiande's face. In shock, Duan Tiande brought his sword back to parry this away. Even though Guo Xiaotian's hands were tied behind his back, his footwork was still quite formidable. So before his body fell down, he twirled his left leg and brought it back and at the same time sent out his right leg, hitting Duan Tiande in his stomach.

In extreme pain and rage, Duan Tiande shouted: "Stick those spears in them! Orders from above, if the traitors resist arrest, kill them all!" The soldiers thrust with their spears. Guo Xiaotian kicked down two soldiers in a row, but having his hands tied behind his back was restricting his quickness as he had to jump away from the spears. Duan Tiande came up from behind him and swung down hard, chopping Guo Xiaotian's entire right arm off at the shoulders. Yang Tiexin was trying to struggle out of the ropes but could not, no matter how hard he tried. Suddenly seeing his sworn brother wounded on the ground, a surge of strength came from somewhere inside him and he snapped the ropes from his body, punched a soldier, grabbed his spear, and whipped out the 'Yang Family Spear'. This time he was fighting without regard for his own life; it was as if he could take on tens of thousands of soldiers all by himself. He had just started but had already taken down two soldiers.

Seeing that the situation had turned, Duan Tiande immediately backed away. The last time, Yang Tiexin was holding back somewhat, not really wanting to kill government soldiers; but now he could not care less. Flicking right and swinging left, he killed several soldiers in an instant. Seeing his ferociousness, the rest of the soldiers scattered at once.

Yang Tiexin did not bother chasing them as he helped his sworn brother sit up. Blood was gushing from where Guo Xiaotian's arm was chopped off and by now his whole body was covered in blood. Yang Tiexin could not stop tears from falling at the sight. Guo Xiaotian gritted his teeth and shouted: "Brother, don't worry about me... leave, leave now!" Yang Tiexin replied desperately: "I'm going to get a horse, and then I'm going to fight until I die to make sure you escape." Guo Xiaotian faintly replied: "No... no...." He passed out. Yang Tiexin took off his outer shirt so he could bandage up the wound. But Duan Tiande had chopped off his shoulder and portions of his chest as well; the wound is almost half-a-body in length and impossible to bandage up. Guo Xiaotian slowly came to and shouted: "Brother, go save our wives. I... I can't... make it..." Before he finished what he was saying, he slumped over and died.

The two sworn brothers always thought of each other as real blood brothers. Seeing his brother die like this, a phrase popped up amidst the anger and the rage in Yang Tiexin's mind. It is the phrase that they said when they became sworn brothers: "Hope to die on the same day of the same month of the same year." He lifted his head up to look around. The two wives had gone missing in all the chaos. He screamed: "Brother, I'm going to avenge your death!" He grabbed his spear and ran toward the crowd of soldiers. By now, the soldiers had already lined up in formation. Duan Tiande issued an order and immediately

arrows flew towards him. Yang Tiexin did not care, as he knocked the arrows out of the way and charged ahead. An official swung the saber in his hand down hard at Yang Tiexin's head. Yang Tiexin ducked and suddenly scrambled underneath the belly of his horse. That official was just about to turn his horse around when a spear penetrated through his heart from the back. Yang Tiexin threw off the corpse and jumped onto the horse. Waving his spear around, none of the soldiers dared to come closer to battle and they started to run off.

After chasing for a while, he suddenly saw an official running away as fast as he could with a woman in his arms. Yang Tiexin jumped off his horse and knocked down a foot soldier. Picking up the soldier's bow and arrow, he aimed the best he could in the dim fire light and let loose. The arrow hit the horse's behind, making the horse kneel down all of the sudden. The two people on the horse came tumbling off. Yang Tiexin let loose another arrow and killed the official. Running up he saw that the woman on the ground, who was now trying to sit up, is his wife.

Overwhelmed with surprise and excitement upon seeing her husband, Bao Xiruo jumped into his arms. Yang Tiexin asked: "Where's our sister-in-law?" Bao Xiruo answered: "Ahead, with... with more soldiers." Yang Tiexin instructed: "You stay here and wait for me. I'm going to save her." Bao Xiruo suddenly said in shock: "But there are more soldiers coming from behind!"

Yang Tiexin turned around and, as she had said, there really was a group of soldiers coming this way with torches in hand. Yang Tiexin gritted his teeth and said: "Brother is dead. No matter what, I have to save Sister-in-Law to save the Guo family bloodline. If the heavens pity us, there will be a day when we meet again." Bao Xiruo put her arms around her husband's neck and would not let go. She said

in between sobs: "We'll never be apart, you said it yourself, even if we die we will die together! Remember? You said it yourself!" Yang Tiexin's heart went sour for a moment as he picked up his wife and gave her a kiss. Then despite every part of his heart not wanting to, he shook free of her arms and charged forward with his spear. After charging for ten steps he turned around and saw that his wife was sobbing in a cloud of dust and the soldiers had already arrived at her side.

Wiping away the sweat, blood, and tears on his face, Yang Tiexin threw his consideration for own life out and thought only about saving Li to make sure that his sworn brother had descendants. After chasing for a while, he got another horse. After grilling an official, he found out that Li was just a bit ahead. So he raced on as hard as he could on the horse. Suddenly, he heard the cries and screams of a woman coming from the woods by the path. He immediately turned the horse and charged into the woods. Li had freed her hands from the ropes and was desperately fighting off two foot soldiers. Being born and raised on the farm, she was very strong for a girl; so although she did not know any kung fu, her desperate fighting was quite tough to handle. The two foot soldiers were cursing and laughing at her, but, at the moment, still could not quite handle her. Yang Tiexin did not bother to say anything and just charged up and killed the two soldiers with two thrusts. He then helped Li up onto the horse. The two of them rode back together, trying to find his wife. When they got back to the place where they parted ways, nobody was there. By now the sky is getting slightly brighter, so he jumped off the horse to inspect the ground. There were traces of someone being dragged away; his wife was probably captured by the soldiers again.

Yang Tiexin immediately jumped up onto the horse and gave the horse several wild kicks in the stomach. In great pain, the horse shot forward. Just as they were galloping at full speed, a bugle suddenly sounded to the side of the path and ten or so warriors clad in black charged out. The first one lifted up his 'wolf fang' club and smashed down. Yang Tiexin parried it with his spear and answered with a thrust. That man replied by swinging his club sideways. His club techniques were very unique, as if it wasn't a skill from the Central Plains.

When Yang Tiexin and Guo Xiaotian used to discuss kung fu and kung fu techniques, they talked about one of the Heroes of the Water Margins, Thunderclap Fire Qing Ming, who used to be the best in the world in 'wolf fang' club techniques. But outside of him, it was very rare to meet someone in the martial world who uses this weapon. Because of the sheer weight of the weapon, it required that the user had to have enormous upper back strength. However, the Jin army loved to use this weapon. This was because the Jin people lived in the freezing cold climate of Liaodong, so they were all very strong. When using this weapon on the battlefield, its heaviness gave them a distinct advantage. Back when the Jin invaded and defeated the Song armies using the 'wolf fang' club, the rage and anger of the peasants and farmers, resulted in a joke that went around. The first person said: "What's so scary about the Jin army? For any one thing they have, we have one thing to counter them." The second person responded: "They've got Acute." The first replied: "We've got Protector Han." The second went on: "They've got Crippled Horse." The first replied: "We got Thin Coarse Saber." The second said: "They've got the 'wolf fang' club." To which the first replied: "We've got the crown of our heads." Meaning that when 'wolf fang' club comes down, the farmers of Song could only

meet it with the top of their heads. This joke is actually filled with bitterness and anger.

By now Yang Tiexin had fought several exchanges with this man with the 'wolf fang' club. Remembering his discussion with Guo Xiaotian, he became more and more suspicious. From the moves and techniques of this man, it was obvious that he was a Jin army official. What's he doing here? Several more exchanges passed when he suddenly quickened his spear moves and stabbed the man off his horse. The rest of them turned around and ran in shock.

Yang Tiexin turned around to check up on whether or not Li was hurt in that last fight. Suddenly an arrow was shot out from the woods. It caught Yang Tiexin by surprise and hit him from behind. In utter panic, Li shouted: "Brother Yang, arrow! Arrow!" Yang Tiexin's heart went cold: "So this is when and where I die! But I have to at least disperse these bastard soldiers before I die, that way Sister-in-Law can get away." So he waved his spear wildly and charged straight at an area crowded with soldiers. But the pain from the arrow in his back was too much and his eyes lost focus as he fainted.

Back when her husband pushed her away, Bao Xiruo felt as if her heart had been shredded. In a blink of an eye the soldiers made it to her side. Before she had time to run away, she was already tied up and thrown onto a horse. One of the army officials brought a torch up to her face and gave her a good look-over. Nodding, he said: "Hard to believe those two bastards could actually do a thing or two, and wounded so many of our men." Another official smiled and said: "Well, finally we can call an end to it and a job well done. After all that trouble, I would have to say that everyone deserves at least ten taels, or more, of silver each." The first official replied: "Hmph! Let's hope the higher ups don't take it all for themselves." Turning around,



he instructed the bugler: "Let's head back!" The bugler brought up his bugle and blew several notes. Bao Xiruo could only sob because all she could think about was her husband and whether or not he's still alive. By now the sky had brightened up somewhat and people are slowly appearing on the path. Seeing a group of soldiers, all of the farmers quickly got out of the way as far as they could. At first Bao Xiruo was worried that the soldiers might get ideas about her; but surprisingly these men actually were polite in their actions and words, so she slowly stopped worrying about it.

After several li, shouts suddenly came from ahead as ten or so armed men dressed in black came charging in from the side of the path. The leader of the group yelled: "Shameless scum! Killing good innocent people! Come down here at once and get what's coming to you!" The leading official was furious and shouted back: "Who do you think you dogs are, making trouble here in the outskirts of the capital? Get out of the way, now!" The gang of men in black did not reply as they charged into the soldiers. Even though there were more soldiers than they, the men in black were all well versed in kung fu, so neither side seemed to have gained an advantage for the moment.

Bao Xiruo was silently excited as she thought to herself: "Maybe Dear Tie's friends heard the news and came to rescue us." In the chaos of battle an arrow came flying in and hit the butt of the horse she was on. Driven by the pain, the horse ran off as fast as it could to the north. In utter shock, Bao Xiruo grabbed hold of the horse's neck with both arms in fear of falling off. The sound of hoof beats came as another horse chased up from behind. In an instant a black horse overtook her. The man on the horse twirled a lasso in the air a couple of times and skillfully tossed it around her horse's neck. The two horses galloped side-by-

side. The man slowly shortened the lasso and together, the two horses gradually slowed down. After several more steps, the man whistled and the black horse immediately stopped dead in its tracks. Because of the lasso, Bao Xiruo's horse could not continue forward and reared up on its hind legs, neighing loudly. Bao Xiruo had been worn out by the events of the night. In a mixture of sadness and horror, she could no longer hang on to the reins. She fell off the horse and fainted.

After sleeping for what seemed like forever, she slowly woke up. It felt like she was sleeping on a very soft and comfortable bed with a thick cotton quilt over her; she felt warm all over. She opened her eyes and the first thing that she saw was the green colored canopy of a bed, as it turned out, she really was sleeping on a bed. A lamp was lit on the table by the bed and it seemed like there was a man dressed in black sitting by the bed. Hearing her turn, that man immediately stood up, parted the bed curtains, and quietly asked: "Are you awake?" Bao Xiruo hadn't completely recovered her consciousness; all she could tell was that this man was somewhat familiar. The man placed his hand on her forehead and gently said: "Still very hot, don't worry; the doctor will be here soon." In a daze, Bao Xiruo slowly fell back to sleep.

After a while, it seemed like a doctor was examining her and then someone was feeding her medicine. After that, all she could do was sleep. She snapped out of a dream and screamed: "Dear Tie! Dear Tie!" followed by someone patting her softly on the shoulder and gently consoling her.

The next time she woke up it was in the middle of the day and she couldn't help but groan. A person walked up and parted the bed curtains. This time as they faced each other, Bao Xiruo saw the face clearly. She was shocked; for this handsome, smiling man in front of her was the very man

she'd saved from certain death in the snow several months ago.

Bao Xiruo asked: "Where am I? Where's my husband?" The young man waved his hand, telling her not to be loud and then lightly replied: "The soldiers are outside looking all over the place. Right now we are borrowing a room at a farmer's place. I'm very sorry, I had to lie and say that I am your husband, please don't accidentally tell them the truth." Bao Xiruo blushed and nodded, but she asked again: "Where's my husband?" The man answered: "Your body is very weak right now. After you get better, then I'll tell you everything."

Bao Xiruo was shocked and from his tone of voice, it seemed like something had happened to her husband. She grabbed the corner of her quilt tightly with both hands and asked in a shaking voice: "He... What... What happened to him?" The man only replied: "Worrying will accomplish nothing now. The most important thing is your health." Bao Xiruo kept on asking: "Is... Is he dead?" The man's face showed that he realized he had no choice in the matter so he gently nodded: "Mr. Yang was killed by those bastard soldiers." He shook his head and sighed. Bao Xiruo felt as if her heart was being torn and she fainted. When she came to after a long time, she started crying her eyes out.

That man gently consoled her. In between sobs, Bao Xiruo asked: "He... How did he die?" That man replied: "Was Mr. Yang a tall, broad-shouldered man around the age of twenty, and uses a spear as a weapon?" Bao Xiruo answered: "Yes, that's him." That man answered: "Earlier today I saw him fighting with several soldiers, killing a couple of them. But... ay! But one of the army officers snuck behind him and stabbed him squarely in the back with his spear."

Bao Xiruo fainted again. She did not drink nor eat for that entire day as she felt obligated to die with her husband. The man didn't try to force her either and he just talked to her in a very gentlemanly manner to keep her company. As this continued Bao Xiruo started to feel as if she was neglecting him, so she asked: "What is your name? How did you know that we were in trouble and come to help?" The man replied: "My surname is Yan, given name is Lie. My friends and I were just passing by yesterday, when we saw soldiers causing trouble. We didn't like what we saw so we decided to help. Who knew that I would end up rescuing my savior? It was as if we were destined to meet like this."

Hearing the words "destined to meet", Bao Xiruo's face turned a little red as she tried to ignore him by turning her face away. She thought about all this in her head for a while. Suddenly something suspicious popped up in her mind as she found a hole in his story. She turned and asked: "Are you on the same side as the soldiers?" Yan Lie was shocked: "Wh... What?" Bao Xiruo explained: "Back on that day, weren't you with the soldiers that tried to catch that Taoist Priest? That's why you were injured right?" Yan Lie answered: "Such bad luck on that day. I came from up north and was heading for Linan, passing by your village. Who was to know that an arrow was going to come out of nowhere and hit me in the shoulder? If it wasn't for your benevolent heart and kindness I really would have died without even knowing why or how. Why were they after that Taoist Priest anyways? Taoist Priests catch ghosts, but soldiers catch Taoist Priests, what kind of logic is that?" When he got to that point he couldn't help but laugh a little.

Bao Xiruo observed: "Oh, so you were just passing by and were not with them. I thought you were one of the people that were there to catch the Taoist. I really didn't know whether or not I should have saved you." She then went on

to explain why the soldiers were there and how Qiu Chuji killed them all.

After talking for a while, Bao Xiruo suddenly noticed that he was staring at her with an entranced gaze and immediately stopped talking. This snapped Yan Lie out of his trance, he smiled and said: "Sorry. I was just thinking about how we can escape without being caught by the soldiers."

Bao Xiruo started to cry and replied: "My... My husband is gone now, how can I live on? Why don't you just escape by yourself and not worry about me?" Yan Lie replied with a straight face: "Madame, your husband was murdered by those bastard soldiers; his death has not been avenged. Yet you are not trying to bring the culprits to justice and are only seeking death. Your husband was a hero among men when he was alive, I'm afraid he won't rest in peace when he finds out about this in the underworld."

Bao Xiruo replied: "I'm only a weak female, how can I possibly avenge his death?" In anger, Yan Lie replied: "Madame's burden, I will gladly take upon my shoulders. Do you know who the culprit is?" Bao Xiruo thought for a bit and answered: "The leader of the soldier's name is Duan Tiande. He has a knife scar on his forehead and a birthmark on his face." Yan Lie replied: "With a name and a way of recognizing him, no matter how far away he runs off, we have to bring him to justice!" He went outside and came back with a bowl of porridge with some salted eggs. He spoke up: "If you don't take care of your health, how can you get your revenge?" Bao Xiruo thought what he said made some sense, so she took the bowl and started to slowly eat its contents.

The next morning, Bao Xiruo arranged her clothes and got off of bed. She brushed her hair properly in front of a mirror, found a piece of white cloth and placed a white

flower in her hair to pay respects to her husband. What she saw in the mirror was a beautiful woman in the prime of her life, yet her husband had already left her behind. Overwhelmed by sadness and loneliness, she put her head down and started crying. Yan Lie walked in and saw her. He said softly: "The soldiers are gone now, let's go." Bao Xiruo followed him out. Yan Lie gave a bit of silver to the master of the house and then led two horses over. The horse that Bao Xiruo had ridden on was hit by an arrow, but Yan Lie had taken care of the wound.

Bao Xiruo asked: "Where do we go to now?" Yan Lie gave her a look, signaling her not to talk so much in front of others. He helped her onto the horse and the two of them rode side by side northward. After riding for many li, Bao Xiruo asked again: "Where do we go now?" Yan Li replied: "Let's find a place where we can settle down for a while and wait out this storm. After the soldiers stop looking for us and let their guard down, then I'll go and find your husband's body so we can give him a proper burial. After that I'm going to find that bastard Duan Tiande and kill him."

Bao Xiruo had a very tender and selfless personality; rarely did she come up with ideas of her own. Besides, right now she's all by herself in the world, and seeing that he had it all figured out, she could not help but be touched. She said: "Mr. Yan, how... how will I ever be able to repay you?" Yan Lie confidently replied: "Madame, this life of mine was saved by you. Even if I have to jump into boiling oil or be smashed into dust, I will serve you for the rest of my life." Bao Xiruo replied: "I only hope that we can avenge my husband's death and kill that evil Duan Tiande as soon as possible so I can join him on the other side." When she had that thought, tears started to roll from of her eyes again. The two of them rode for the rest of the day and then

stopped at a little inn in Changan for the night. Yan Lie put the two down as a couple and got one room. Bao Xiruo could not help but feel that there was something wrong about this. She did not utter a word during dinner and she secretly touched the dagger that Qiu Chuji gave her to make sure it's there. She made up her mind: "If he gets any ideas, I will kill myself right there on the spot."

Yan Lie instructed the floor manager to bring him two bundles of straw into the room. He waited until the floor manager left before locking the door and laying out the straw on the floor. He lay down on the straw and covered himself with a felt blanket. He turned to Bao Xiruo: "Goodnight Madame." And then he closed his eyes.

Bao Xiruo's heart was beating a mile a minute. Remembering her dead husband, she felt all torn up inside. She blankly sat there for over an hour before finally sighing and blowing out the candle. Still clutching the dagger tightly, she climbed onto the bedding with her cloths on.

When Bao Xiruo woke up the next day, Yan Lie had already packed and readied everything, as well as instructing the floor manager to get some breakfast ready. Bao Xiruo was very thankful for his gentlemanly actions and let most of her guard down. By the time she ate breakfast, she noticed that there was a dish of chicken fried noodles, a dish of ham, a dish of sausages, a dish of smoked fish, and a small pot of deliciously smelling rice and stock gruel. She was raised in a moderately well off family. Even after marrying into the Yang family, she had always led the life of typical farmer. Usually, breakfast for her was a couple of salted vegetables and half a salted egg. Other than the New Year and weddings, she had never eaten such delicacies. As a result she felt quite uncomfortable during the breakfast.

Once she finished eating, the floor manager came in with a bundle. By now Yan Lie had left them room. Bao Xiruo asked: "What is this?" The floor manager replied: "Mister went out as soon as the sun rose and bought a change of clothing for Madame. He told me to ask you to change into it." Once he finished he put down the bundle and left. Bao Xiruo opened the bundle and was shocked. It was a completely white mourning dress made out of silk with matching white socks, shoes, inner garments, and jacket. Also included were a matching scarf, bandanas, and other accessories. She thought: "It's hard for a young man like him to think of everything." When she changed into the clothing, she thought that Yan Lie bought these himself made her blush. She had left her home in a hurry in the middle of the night, so her clothing was not very neat to begin with. After a whole night of misadventures, she was covered in dirt and sweat. Now that she had cleaned up somewhat, her spirits picked up somewhat as well. When Yan Lie returned, she noticed he had changed into colorful and expensive attire as well.

The two of them got on their way again. Sometimes one of them rode in front while the other one followed, other times they rode side-by-side. The season of spring was in its full glory south of the Yangtze; willows brushed people's shoulder on the road, flower fragrances filled the air and people's hearts. Now plants were starting to sprout on the farms.

In order to distract her thoughts and ease her troubled mind, Yan Lie kept on talking to her about various random subjects. Bao Xiruo's father was an unaccomplished scholar in a little village, her husband and his sworn brother were both straightforward and unrefined men. She had never met someone as refined, gentlemanly, and knowledgeable as Yan Lie. When they talked, she felt that every word,



every sentence that he spoke were highly intelligent and thought-provoking; she could not but secretly look at him in wonder. However, they kept on heading north and getting further and further away from Linan; not only that, he never once mentioned revenge or even bring up the subject of a proper burial for her husband. Finally, she could not keep it in anymore and asked: "Mr. Yan, what are your plans regarding my husband's body?"

Yan Lie relied: "It's not that I don't want to search for your husband's body and give him a proper burial; but I killed government officials when I rescued Madame. Right now it is very dangerous for me there. As soon as I show myself around Linan, I would no doubt be killed by the soldiers. Besides, right now the soldiers are all over the place looking for Madame. After all, your husband did commit treason by killing officials, this is a huge crime. If his relatives are captured, the men will be executed and women made into prostitutes for the soldiers. Dying for me is no big thing, but if nobody was around to protect Madame and the soldiers catch you, I could not bare to think of the consequences. Even in the underworld, I would be saddened beyond my own imaginings." Seeing how honest and sincere he looked and sounded, Bao Xiruo nodded. Yan Lie continued: "I have thought this over thoroughly; the most important thing right now is to give your husband a proper burial. So we are going to Jiaxing so I can obtain some money and get someone to take care of it in Linan. If Madame has to do it herself, then let me settle you down in Jiaxing and take the risk by myself."

Bao Xiruo felt she was expecting a bit too much for him to take such a big risk for her and replied: "If you can find someone reliable to take care of the whole matter, then that would be for the best." She continued: "My husband had a sworn brother with the surname of Guo; he died with my

husband. I am sorry to trouble you by asking you to try to give him a proper burial as well. I... I..." She started crying.

Yan Lie replied: "It's no trouble at all, just leave it all to me. As for revenge, that bastard Duan Tiande is a government official; killing him is not so easy. Besides, he will be extra careful right now, all we can do is wait patiently for our chance." Bao Xiruo wanted to kill Duan Tiande to avenge her husband and then follow him into the underworld. Even though Yan Lie's every word seemed true, she didn't know how long she would have to wait for this to happen. In a moment of impatience, she started to sob loudly. In between sobs, she replied: "I really don't know about revenge. Even a hero like my husband could not defeat him. I... I'm just a weak woman, what... what can I do? Just let me die and join my husband and that'll be that."

Feeling that the situation was truly difficult, Yan Lie thought for a long while before finally saying: "Madame, do you trust me?" Bao Xiruo nodded. Yan Lie continued: "The only thing we can do now is to head up north to avoid the soldiers. The Song officials can't chase us if we are in the north. As soon as we cross the Yangtze, we should be out of danger. We'll wait until things have cooled down before returning south and avenging your husband. Madame, please be rest assured that I will take care of this whole matter of justice for your husband."

Bao Xiruo hesitated: "I am homeless without any relatives in the world, if I don't follow him, where can a woman like me settle down in this world? The faces of the soldiers that night were beastly; if I had fallen into their hands, I would have definitely suffered a fate worse than death itself. Yet this man is not a friend or a relative, should a widow like me be traveling together with a young man like him? If I tried to kill myself right now, he would without a doubt stop me." She felt lost; the only thing she was sure of is that the

future will be difficult. Thinking forward and looking back like this, she felt as if her insides were being twisted. For several days straight she had shed tears and now it seemed as if she had ran out of tears to shed.

an Lie spoke up: "If Madame feels that any part of my plan is bad, then please tell me. There is nothing I wouldn't do for you." Seeing how accommodating he is, Bao Xiruo actually felt a little bad about hesitating. Other than committing suicide, she really could not find another way out. Having no other choice, she lowered her head and replied: "Why don't you take care of it."

Yan Lie could not be happier: "I will forever be grateful that Madame saved my life. Madame...." Bao Xiruo interrupted him: "You don't have to mention that matter ever again." Yan Lie replied: "Yes, yes of course."

That night, the two of them stopped at an inn in the town of Xiashi, still only getting one room. Ever since Bao Xiruo agreed to go up north with him, Yan Lie's actions have not been as gentlemanly and proper as before. Once in a while his excitement would get out of hand. Bao Xiruo felt an indistinct notion that something might not be appropriate. But seeing that he had not shown even the slightest trace of getting any ideas, she figured that he must be a little too excited about being able to fully show his gratitude.

he two of them reached Jiaxing at noon the next day. Jiaxing is a big city in the western parts of Zhejiang. Since this was the place where many trade routes came together, it had always been a very prosperous place. When the Song dynasty moved south, Jiaxing had also become much closer to the capital, thus becoming even more prosperous and bustling.

Yan Lie suggested: "Let's find an inn and rest up for a bit." Bao Xiruo was worried about soldiers finding them and

said: "It's still early; we can still cover some ground." Yan Lie replied: "The stores here aren't half bad. Madame's clothing is old and worn; we'll have to buy some new ones." This surprised Bao Xiruo as she took a moment to recover and replied: "Didn't you just buy this yesterday? How is it already old and worn?" Yan Lie answered: "There was a lot of dust on the way, after wearing the same clothing for a couple of days it is no longer colorful anymore. Besides, as beautiful as Madame is, how can Madame possibly not wear the best clothing in the world?"

Hearing him praising her beauty, Bao Xiruo was secretly happy inside, but she lowered her head and said: "I am in the middle of paying my respects...." Yan Lie immediately cut her off: "Yes, of course. I understand." Bao Xiruo did not say anything more. Her husband had never praised her beauty to her face like this before; she peeked over at Yan Lie and saw only sincerity on his face. At once her heart shook, but she couldn't figure out if it was from happiness or sadness.

In Jiaxing Yan Lie asked about accommodations and was directed to the biggest inn, the 'Elegant Waters Inn'. After washing up, Yan Lie and Bao Xiruo ate some snacks together, sitting across from each other. Bao Xiruo wanted to ask him for a separate room but didn't know how to word it. Her face changed color several times for this was a heavy burden on her heart. After a bit, Yan Lie spoke up: "Madame, please make your self at home. I'm going out to buy some things and am coming right back afterwards." Bao Xiruo nodded: "Please don't spend too much money." Yan Lie smiled and replied: "Pity that Madame is wearing mourning apparel and can't wear any jewelry. Even if I want to spend too much I can't."

## Chapter 2 - Seven Freaks of the South

Translated by Minglei Huang



*Han Baoju's left foot hooked the stirrup, while both of his hands and his right foot were holding the copper vat, balancing it neatly on the saddle, not leaning the least bit to the side. That yellow*

*horse ran fast and steady, as if the stairs were flat ground to it.*

Just as Yan Lie walked out of the door, he saw a middle aged scholar walking his way in the hallway, dragging his feet and yawning constantly. He was sort of smiling but not really and kept on giving him curious looks, all the while looking very relaxed and lazy. He was covered with dirt and oil and his clothing was a mess. He obviously hadn't taken a bath in a long time. He had an old broken black oil paper fan in hand that he was fanning himself with as he was walking.

Seeing such an obviously refined scholar looking so dirty, Yan Lie frowned and picked up his pace in fear of getting some dirt on himself. Suddenly the scholar began laughing dryly; a laugh that was very harsh on the ear. As he was walking by him, he casually reached out with his fan and patted Yan Lie on the shoulder. Even though Yan Lie knew martial arts, he was not able to get out of the way in time, this set him off and he shouted: "What do you think you're doing?"

The scholar laughed dryly again as he kept on walking, dragging his feet all through the hallway. He approached the manager and said: "Hey, fellow, even though I look really rough, I have lots of money. You have to watch out for some people though; they trick people with their nice and refined looks. They put up a show for everyone, seducing women, eat free food, live in inns for free, you know the type, so be on the lookout for them. To be safe, make them pay the bill beforehand." He didn't wait for the manager to respond before walking off, still dragging his feet. Yan Lie got even angrier, knowing that that whole conversation was aimed at him.

After that little comment from the scholar, the manager turned his eyes toward Yan Lie; he now couldn't help but feel a little suspicious. Walking up to Yan Lie, he yawned a little, smiled and said: "Sir, please don't mind too much, it's not that I want to be impolite...." Yan Lie knew what he meant as he humphed and replied: "Put this money in the drawer!" He put his hand into his shirt to take the money out and was shocked. There had been at least forty or fifty taels of silver in his shirt, but, now that he was reaching for it, there was nothing there. The manager saw the expression on his face and actually thought that the scholar's words were true. Immediately his expression became less polite as he thrust his chest out and asked: "What? No money?"

Yan Lie replied: "Wait here, I'm going to get some right now." He thought that he had forgotten his money because he was in a hurry to leave. As it turned out, when he went back to the room and looked into the bag that he had with him, even the taels of gold he'd had were gone as well. As to where his money went, he had no idea at all. He thought: "Just a bit ago Madame Bao and I both went to the water closet, but that only took several minutes or so, how could anyone have entered and messed around with the room? The thieves here in Jiaxing are really getting good."

The manager stuck his head in through the door and looked around; seeing that he did not have any money, he got angry: "Is this woman your wife? If you're doing something indecent, then don't come here because it'll bring us trouble as well!" Bao Xiruo was thoroughly embarrassed and her face turned burning red. Yan Lie took one quick step towards the door and swung his arm, slapping the manager so hard that his face was covered with blood and he lost several teeth. The manager had his face in his hands as he began to scream: "I see! First you don't pay, now you

want to fight!" Yan Lie added a kick to his behind and the manager went tumbling out of the room.

Shocked, Bao Xiruo suggested: "Let's get out of here; we can't stay here any longer." Yan Lie smiled: "Don't worry, if we don't have any money then we'll just ask them for some." He grabbed a chair and sat down by the door. Not long afterwards, the manager came back with twelve or so men, each with a club or stick in hand as they charged into the room. Yan Lie let out a big laugh and shouted: "So you men want a fight?" He suddenly jumped forward and confidently grabbed a stick from one of the men; faking left and hitting right, in a blink of an eye he had already knocked four or five men down. These ruffians usually got by using intimidation and bullying the weak, but seeing that their opponent was actually a match for them, they immediately threw down their weapons and scrambled out of the room. Those who were on the floor were crawling and rolling with all their might in fear of being left behind and hit again.

Bao Xiruo, who had been frightened a long time ago, said in a shaky voice: "Things are getting out of hand and the authorities might catch wind of this." Yan Lie smiled and replied: "I want the authorities to show up." Bao Xiruo could not figure out his plan, so she decided to stay quiet and see what happened.

In less than an hour's time, a ruckus occurred outside as ten or so government officials came bursting in with iron sabers in hand. The rings on the sabers were banging against each other, making all kinds of noise; they shouted above the cacophony: "Not only kidnapping, but assault as well, how dare he? Where is the scoundrel?" Yan Lie sat there motionless in the chair. Seeing his fancy clothing and his proud arrogance, the officials didn't really dare to charge up to him. The leader of the group shouted: "Ay!



What's your name? What are you doing here in Jiaxing?" Yan Lie shouted back: "Go get Gai Yuncong!"

Gai Yuncong was the governor of the prefecture of Jiaxing; hearing that he dared speak their superior's name directly, the government officials were both shocked and furious. The leader shouted: "Are you crazy? How dare you shout the Honorable Prefect Gai's name in public?" Yan Lie took out an envelope from inside his shirt and put it down on the table; he looked up at the ceiling and said: "Take this to Gai Yuncong and see if he comes or not!" The leader took the envelope, seeing the words on it, he took a step back in shock; unsure if it was real or not, he whispered to the other men: "Look after him, don't let him get away." He then went flying off. Bao Xiruo just sat there in the room nervously, not knowing what would happen next.

Soon another ten or so government men came running in, along with them came two men wearing official uniforms that scrambled in front of Yan Lie and knelt while saying: "Humble Prefect Gai Yuncong of the city of Jiaxing and District Magistrate Jiang Wen of the district of Xiushui are honored to meet your Excellency. Your humble servant did not know that your Excellency had arrived, so please forgive us for not welcoming you properly." Yan Lie waved his hand a little and shifted his weight slightly: "I lost a little bit of money in this county and would like to request that you two brilliant judges investigate the matter." Gai Yuncong immediately nodded: "Yes, of course." He then waved his arm, two of the followers came walking up with a plate in each of their hands; one of them was glowing yellow because of the gold yuan bao [boat shaped ingot] on it, the other one, needless to say, had silver yuan bao on it.

Gai Yuncong spoke up: "To think that there are such brazen thieves in my jurisdiction, it is my fault as well. I hope your Excellency will accept this as a slight compensation." Yan

Lie smiled and nodded. Gai Yuncong reverentially held up the envelope and said: "Your humble servant has just cleaned up my humble dwelling and would be honored if your Excellency and Madame would move there." Yan Lie replied: "This place is suitable; I enjoy the peace and quiet." His face suddenly darkened, "Don't come around disturbing us anymore." Gai Yuncong immediately nodded and said: "Yes, yes of course! If your Excellency still needs anything, then please do not hesitate to ask your humble servant." Yan Lie did not reply, he only shook his head and waved his arm repeatedly. The two men quickly led the other men away.

The manager was scared out of his wits as the owner of the place dragged him into the room. The owner kneeled down and kowtowed asking for mercy for them both. He said that as long as they are left alive, they would be willing to accept whatever other punishment might come their way. Yan Lie took out a silver yuan bao from the plate, threw it down on the floor, and said smiling: "Take it, it's a reward. Now get out of my sight." The manager couldn't quite believe it all, but the owner saw that Yan Lie had no ill will in his expression, so he immediately picked up the silver yuan bao, kowtowed a couple of times, and dragged the manager out of sight in fear that Yan Lie might change his mind.

Bao Xiruo could not quite believe what she had just seen: "What kind of magic does that envelope hold? How come the authorities were frightened out of their wits when they saw its contents?" Yan Lie smiled: "I actually have no power over them really, but these officials are hopeless. Zhao Kuo only has this kind of people serving him; if he doesn't lose this country, then there is no justice in the world." Bao Xiruo asked: "Zhao Kuo? Who is that?" Yan Lie casually replied: "The present Song Emperor Ningzong." Shocked, Bao Xiruo immediately admonished: "Quiet! How can you

say His Majesty's name out loud like that?" Seeing that she cared about his safety, Yan Lie was ecstatic; smiling, he said: "It's no big deal if I say it out loud. Up north, what would we call him if we don't call him Zhao Kuo?" Bao Xiruo was confused: "Up north?" Yan Lie nodded and was about to explain when hurried hoof beats suddenly come from outside as ten or so riders came and stopped in front of the inn. Some color had just returned to Bao Xiruo's white face; but upon hearing the hoof beats, the events of that night all came back to her. This made her face turn white as a sheet again. Yan Lie was frowning, looking as if he was not very pleased.

Then came sound of boots as several soldiers in fine clothing came walking in. Upon seeing Yan Lie, their faces immediately broke out in smiles as they simultaneously shouted: "Your Majesty!" All of them kneeled down and saluted. Yan Lie smiled: "So you're finally here." Hearing that they called Yan Lie "Your Majesty", Bao Xiruo was both surprised and puzzled. As those men got up off the floor, she noticed that they were all very strong and well built. Yan Lie waved his arm and said: "Go wait outside." The soldiers answered and quickly left. Yan Lie turned to Bao Xiruo: "How do you think my men compare with those Song soldiers?" Bao Xiruo was even more surprised: "They are not Song soldiers?" Yan Lie smiled: "I guess I have to be honest now, they are all Great Jin's elite soldiers!" He could not help but laugh out of pride.

Bao Xiruo suddenly realized: "Then... you... you are..." Yan Lie smiled and answered: "To tell Madame the truth, my surname needs one more word: 'Wan' and my given name also has one more word: 'Hong'. Wanyan Honglie, the Sixth Prince of Great Jin, and titled the Prince of Zhao, at your service."

Ever since she was small, Bao Xiruo had heard from her father the devious ways that the Jin used to take the land of her Great Song. The shame caused by the capture of the two emperors, and the cruelty with which the Jin torture and treat the Han peasants up north. It was the same after she married Yang Tiexin, who hated the Jin even more. To find out that the person that she had spent all this time with these last couple of days was actually a prince of the Jin, she was left speechless.

Seeing the expression on her face change, Wanyan Honglie smiled and continued: "I have always been fascinated by the south. Last year I asked my father to let me travel down to Linan as the good will ambassador for the New Year celebrations. Besides, the Emperor of Song still owed a couple hundred thousand taels of silver in annual tribute, so father wanted me to collect that on my trip as well." Bao Xiruo interrupted: "Annual tribute?" Wanyan Honglie replied: "Yes, the Song Emperors, in order to convince us not to invade, pay us a tribute every year in silk and silver. But they always complain that not enough revenue was generated through taxes, so they never gave us the tribute on time. This time I didn't leave any room for Han Tuozhuo to fall back on. I told him that if he didn't get all the money together within the month, I would personally lead an army down to collect it ourselves: then he wouldn't have to worry about it anymore." Bao Xiruo interrupted again: "What did Chancellor Han say?" Wanyan Honglie proudly replied: "What can he say? By the time I left Linan, the silk and silver were all north of the river! Ha...ha!" Seeing Bao Xiruo was looking downwards and not responding he went on: "Actually, this tribute stuff didn't really need me; any emissary could have done the job. What I really wanted was to see the south, to experience its beauty and to meet its people for myself. Who knew that I would meet Madame, I dare not hope for such good fortune." Bao Xiruo was at a

loss as to what to make of the situation and still did not reply. Wanyan Honglie offered: "I'm off to buy some clothes for Madame now." Bao Xiruo replied with her head down: "No need." Wanyan Honglie smiled and said: "The traveling money Chancellor Han gave me under the table wouldn't be gone if I bought a new set of clothes for Madame every day for a thousand years. Madame, don't worry, my soldiers are stationed all around this place, nobody would dare to trouble you." After he finished, he walked off. Bao Xiruo thought about all that had happened since she met him; a royal prince like him, treating her as politely as he does, what does he plan to do? Then her thoughts drifted to her husband's love and caring for her, yet he was killed and left her here alone. She really didn't know what she should do or could do. In desperation, sadness and confusion, all she could do is clutch her pillow and cry her heart out.

Wanyan Honglie, having put the gold and silver into his shirt, walked out onto the street. Seeing the friendly attitude of the place and the people, even though most of them were peasants, there were still many refined and educated people, he could not help but be impressed. Suddenly, hurried hoof beats came from ahead of him as a horse galloped through the streets towards him. This street wasn't very wide to begin with and now it was filled with people and merchants; added to that, people had sent up small vendor booths on both sides of the street, how could a horse gallop through it? Wanyan Honglie immediately dodged to the side of the street and, in the blink of an eye, a yellow horse came bursting through the crowd of people. This was no ordinary horse; it was tall and fit with muscles rippling throughout its body, obviously it was a very rare thoroughbred. Wanyan Honglie was admiring the horse and when he looked up at the rider he was surprised yet again. Such a beautiful horse, but its rider was a sorry looking fellow who was both short and fat; he looked like a giant

slab of meat riding on that horse. This person's arms and legs were amazingly short, he did not have a neck, yet his head was extraordinarily big, as if his neck was sucked into his shoulders. It seemed rather odd that horse was galloping through the crowd of people at full speed, yet it did not run into a single person or knock over a single object. Its hooves landed on the ground softly and nimbly, jumping over pottery, side-stepping vegetables; it seemed to be flashing through some non-existent gap in the crowd, as though this crowded street was a wide open plain. Wanyan Honglie could no longer contain himself and shouted out loud: "Excellent!"

Hearing that praise, that short chubby fellow turned his head and glanced at him. Wanyan Honglie noticed that his entire face was covered with red spots caused by drinking too much wine; his big and round as well as equally red wine nose looked as if there was a red tomato stuck on his face. He thought to himself: "Such an excellent horse; I have to have it, no matter the price." At this moment, two kids playing tag ran onto the street just in front of the horse. They came out of nowhere and gave the horse quite a scare as it had no room to get out of the way. The horse's left foot was just about to land on one of the kids when the rider lifted up the reins and jumped off of the saddle. Suddenly becoming lighter, the horse's stride became higher and longer, easily flying over the kid's head. That rider then softly and gently landed back onto the saddle.

Shocked, Wanyan Honglie immediately decided, that even though there were a great number of skilled riders among the Jin, none were a match for this man. If he could get this man to go back with him to train the cavalry, then his cavalry would be almost invincible; this was something much more important to him than a great horse. On this trip south, he made mental notes on where an army could

be stationed and where the rivers could be crossed; he even asked around about the skills and names of every administrator in the counties he crossed. Seeing the amazing skill of this short fellow, he couldn't believe how stupid the Song authorities were for letting a talent like this go to waste. He decided then and there that he was going to somehow convince this man to go back to Yanjing with him. Having made the decision, he immediately started running after them, fearing that, with the horse's speed, he would lose him. He was just about to shout at them when he saw the horse had run to the corner of the street and stopped. This was quite unexpected as he figured that, with the speed that the horse was running, he would have to slowly come to a stop, yet this horse was able to stop instantly. This is something he had never ever seen before; even some great martial arts practitioners wouldn't be able to come to a complete stop when they are exerting themselves like this. The short, fat fellow jumped off the horse and charged into a building.

Wanyan Honglie hurried to the front of the building, inside the building was erected a large wooden sign: "Handed Down from Venus"; it was a two-storied restaurant. Looking up, a huge sign hanging from the roof had the words "Pavilion of the Drunken Immortal" written on it; the calligraphy was very elegant. On the side was written, in smaller characters, "By Resident Dongpo", it turned out that the words were written by Su Dongpo [One of the greatest scholars of the Song dynasty as well as all of Chinese history.]. Seeing the grandeur of this restaurant, Wanyan Honglie thought: "Since he is here, then I might as well invite him to a great big meal; that way I can become great friends with him and everything after that would be simple." All of a sudden that fellow came running down from upstairs to the horse's side with a wine jug in hand. Wanyan Honglie immediately got out of the way.

Now that he was standing on the ground, the fellow looked even more out of proportion. He wasn't over 1.5 meters [5 ft] high, yet he was almost 1.5 meters wide as well. The horse was very tall in stature because of its long legs and the man's head was barely as high as the stirrup from the saddle. He placed the wine jug in front of the horse, gently hit the jug a couple of times, and then casually picked the top half of the jug off, turning the jug into a gigantic bowl of wine. The horse reared up on its hind legs and let out a loud neigh before coming back down and drinking from the bowl. From the sweet smell in the air, Wanyan Honglie could tell that the wine was actually the famed wine "Blushing Daughter" [Nu'er Hong] from Shaoxing county in Zhejiang province. From the fragrance, it had been left aging for more than 10 years.

The short, fat fellow walked back into the restaurant and tossed a huge silver ingot onto the owner's desk: "Prepare three tables of the best food; two of them can have meat and wine, the other one can't." The owner smiled and replied: "Right away, Mr. Han. We just received four Sai Lu fish from the Song River; they are the best when served with wine. Please take the money back Mr. Han, we'll sort all that out later." The short, chubby fellow rolled his eyes and shouted: "What's the matter? Eating and drinking are free? Do you think I'm broke and just beg off of other people?" Still with a smile on his face, the owner argued no further as he turned and shouted: "Men, prepare some really good stuff for Mr. Han!" The cooks and waiters around the place answered and went about their jobs.

Wanyan Honglie was taking all this in: "Although he's dressed plainly, he spends money like a wealthy man; judging from how everyone is treating him with such manners, he's probably a powerful man in Jiaying. It would seem that convincing him to go up north with me to teach



horse riding is going to be quite difficult. Let's see who the people are he's inviting to lunch before going any further." So he went into the restaurant, sat down at a table by the window, and ordered a couple of small dishes along with a bottle of wine.

The Pavilion of the Drunken Immortal was situated on the shores of the South Lake. The lake surface was covered by a light fog and several small boats were slowly making their way around the lake. Green and smooth looking water caltrop leaves [water chestnut] cover about half of the lake. Seeing such a sight, he immediately felt relaxed and at peace. Jiaxing is a famous city of the ancient state of Yue; the plums grown here were sweet and delicious like the best wines. During the Spring and Autumn Period this place was called Zuili, meaning Drunken Plums. It was also here that the famed King of Yue, Gou Jian, had thoroughly defeated the famed King of Wu, He Lu. This place was the point at which travelers and merchants from the two states came together. The South Lake was famous for another thing, the green water caltrops [water chestnuts] grown in it. Not only are the fruit of the caltrops sweet and smooth, they are also crunchy and refreshing, deservedly proclaimed as the best in the world. This resulted in a lot of caltrop being grown in the lake. It was right in the middle of spring, the lake was clean and the leaves were green, as if someone had covered a sheet of jade glass with small pieces of jadeite.

Wanyan Honglie was just enjoying the scene when he suddenly noticed a single boat come flying into view. This boat was unusually narrow in width and the bow of the boat was extraordinarily high. Along the sides of the boat there were two rows of waterfowl. At first he didn't pay much attention to it, but in a blink of an eye, the boat had overtaken another boat that was far ahead of it. The speed

at which the boat was going was astounding. As soon as it got closer, Wanyan Honglie saw that there was a person sitting in the middle of the boat; another person wearing a straw cape sat in the back steering the boat, surprisingly it was a girl. She had only to lightly flick the oar in the water and the boat would shoot forward like an arrow. That one flick had to be at least powerful enough to move a 100 jin object. It was odd enough that a girl would be so strong, but how could she exert such a force through a wooden oar? A few more strokes and the boat neared the pavilion. The sun shone down onto the oar which appeared to be made of copper. The girl tied the boat to one of the wooden posts beside the stone staircase next to the pavilion and nimbly jumped ashore. The man sitting in the middle of the boat put a pole with a load of firewood on each end onto his shoulders and followed her ashore. The two of them walked up into the pavilion. The girl shouted happily at the chubby fellow: "Third Brother!" She proceeded to sit down next to him. The fat man greeted the two people: "Fourth Brother, Little Sister, you two showed up early." When Wanyan Honglie sized the two newcomers up, he noticed that the girl was about seventeen or eighteen years of age with a slender body, big eyes, long eye-lashes, and snow white skin; she was obviously a local girl from south of the Yangtze. She had the copper oar in her left hand and took off her straw hat with her right hand, revealing a head of soft, shining, black hair. Wanyan Honglie mused: "Although this girl isn't as beautiful as Madame Bao, she is still very attractive in another way."

The man carrying the firewood was about thirty or so; his clothing was green colored with a belt made of straw around his waist and straw sandals on his feet. His hands and feet were huge and his face appeared without emotion. He put down the two loads of wood and rested his carrying pole against the table. "Errrrr"! The entire table was

pushed several centimeters down by the weight of the pole. Shocked, Wanyan Honglie inspected the pole closely, but there seemed nothing out of the ordinary with this pole. It was black and smooth all over with a slight curve in the middle and two little caps on either end. For this pole to be that heavy, it had to be made of iron or some other kind of heavy metal. A wooden ax hung from the man's waist and there were some noticeable dents on the blade of the ax.

The two of them had just sat down when the sound of foot steps came from the stairs as two more men came walking up. The girl shouted: "Fifth Brother, Sixth Brother, did you two come together?" The first man was big and tall, at least 130 or 140 kilograms [around 285 to 308 lbs], he wore an apron around his waist. His body was naturally oily and the top of his shirt was open, revealing some of what must be a chest full of hair. His sleeves were all rolled up as well and his arms were covered with black hair that was several centimeters long and hanging from his waist was a foot-long knife. From his appearance he was a butcher. The one behind him was unusually short with a small felt hat on his head and a small scale and bamboo basket in his hands; he looked just like a street vendor. Wanyan Honglie could not help but wonder: "These three people obviously know martial arts, yet they call these two average city dwellers brothers?"

Suddenly there came a constant clunking outside on the street, like that made from metal hitting stone. The clunking slowly came up the staircase, and a blind man dressed in ragged clothing followed. He looked around forty years of age; his lips were thin and his cheekbones prominent. His face looked gray and seemed full of hate and anger. The five people sitting at the table all stood up and greeted: "Big Brother!" The girl lightly knocked on the seat of one of the chairs: "Big Brother, you sit here." The blind

man replied: "Alright, is Second Brother here yet?" The man that looked like a butcher replied: "Second Brother has arrived in Jiaxingg, so he should be here any time soon." The girl laughed: "Speak of the devil!" The sound of someone dragging his feet as he walked came from the staircase.

Before Wanyan Honglie figured it all out, up the stairs appeared a dirty torn fan which was flicked a couple of times, and only then did a poor, lackadaisical scholar come walking up. The very one that he had met earlier in the inn. A thought popped in Wanyan Honglie's mind: "He must have been the one that took my money..." Just as his anger was rising, the man shot a smile at him and then stuck his tongue out and made a face; only then did he turn to the others and greet them. It seemed that he was second among them. Wanyan Honglie speculated: "Looks like every one of them is a martial arts master; if I can somehow take them under my wing, they would be an enormous amount of help for our endeavors. As for the small matter of the poor scholar taking my money, that could easily be forgiven. It would be best to see what's going on first." The poor and pedantic scholar downed a cup of wine, then proceeded, still shaking his head from one side to the other, to loudly orate: "Dishonorable riches... let it go ... The Jade Emperor [Yu Huang Da Di, the Supreme Deity of Taoism] will get mad!" As he was reciting these lines, he reached into his shirt and took out one gold or silver yuan bao after another and neatly lined them up on the table. In total there were eight of silver and two of gold.

From these yuan baos' color and shape, Wanyan Honglie knew that these were his. But he did not get mad; on the contrary, this piqued his interest even more: "Entering my room and stealing the money wasn't hard; but he only tapped my shoulder one time with his fan, yet he was able

to steal all the money that was inside my shirt without my noticing. That magical hand skill of his is indeed something rarely seen in this world."

From the actions of these six men and a woman, it seemed like they were doing the inviting, and had invited two tables of men here for a drink. Because the guests hadn't arrived yet, the seven of them were only drinking some light wine and the dishes hadn't been brought out either. On the other two tables was only one pair of chopsticks each; that meant there were only two guests. Wanyan Honglie mused: "These seven freaks are waiting for guests; I wonder what kind of weird guests they'll have?" After waiting for about the time it would take to boil a pot of water, a voice came up from downstairs: "Amida Buddha!" The blind man spoke up: "The venerable monk Jiaomu [Burnt Wood] is here!" He stood up; the other six freaks followed him as they all stood up in preparation to welcome the guest. "Amida Buddha!" The voice said again as a monk that looked every bit like a burnt piece of wood came walking up the stairs. This monk was about forty or so, he was wearing a yellow monk's robe and in his hand was a piece of wood with one end burnt black. It's unclear what it's used for.

After the monk and the seven of them went through the formal greetings, the poor scholar led him to one of the empty tables and all of them sat down. The monk rose slightly out of his seat in respect and said: "When that person came all the way to our gates, I knew that I was no match for him. Now that the Seven Heroes of the South are willing to lend a hand, I could not be anymore grateful."

The blind man replied: "Venerable Monk Jiaomu, you do not need to be so polite. We seven brothers and sister have all been dependent upon the monk's hospitality now and then; now that monk Jiaomu is in trouble, how could we not get involved? Besides, that man came and, relying entirely upon

his martial arts skills, made trouble for the monk for no reason. It is clear that he thinks nothing of us here in the martial world from this area. Even if the Venerable Monk did not ask us, we would have come had we found out about...."

He hadn't finished what he was going to say when the stairs started groaning as if they were going to collapse. It was like a huge, heavy beast, like an elephant, or at least a huge water buffalo, was walking up the stairs. The owner of the place and the waiters were all screaming downstairs: "Ay! You idiot, you can't take that up there!" "The stairs are going to collapse!" "Quick, quick, stop him, get him back down here!" But the sound of wood bending got louder and louder. "Crack"! One of the wooden stair treads snapped. Soon two more snapped as well.

For a moment Wanyan Honglie wasn't sure he believed what he was seeing; a Taoist priest came walking up the stairs with a huge copper vat in his hands. After taking another look, he was frightened out of his wits; the Taoist priest was the 'Changchun Zi' [Eternal Spring] elder Qiu Chuji.

Wanyan Honglie's mission as emissary to the Song Imperial Court was to coerce some of the officials of the Song court, so that when they eventually invade the south, there would be agents lending a hand from the inside. The Song Emissary, Wang Daoqian, who accompanied him down from Yanjing (Present Day Beijing) was greedy and corrupt; he had already secretly sworn allegiance to the Jin dynasty. When they arrived at Linan, he was the one that did the legwork for Wanyan Honglie. But unexpectedly he was killed suddenly by a Taoist priest; even his head, heart, and liver was gone. Shocked and in fear that someone had found out about his plan, Wanyan Honglie decided to lead his bodyguards and, with the best city guards of Linan

leading the way, personally chase down the assassin. When they chased him to Ox Village they caught up with Qiu Chuji. Unexpectedly, this Taoist priest was a martial arts master. Wanyan Honglie hadn't even made a move before he was pierced through the shoulder by an arrow that Qiu Chuji threw back. The men that came with him were all killed. If Wanyan Honglie had not quietly crawled away during the confusion of the battle and was then rescued and treated by Bao Xiruo, the dignified and honorable royal prince of the Jin dynasty would have died there in a farm village without even really knowing how he had been killed.

Wanyan Honglie forced himself to calm down, and noticed that Qiu Chuji glanced at his face for a moment before moving his attention entirely onto the monk Jiaomu and the group of seven; obviously, he had not recognized him. Figuring that this was because he had been injured as soon as he showed up that night so Qiu Chuji was not able to see his face clearly, only then did he feel a little better. But when his eyes moved back to the copper vat, he was shocked again, so much so that he almost jumped out of his chair.

This kind of vat was common in temples and shrines and was commonly used for burning papers, incense and fake money for the dead. It was more than a meter across and was probably around 400 jins [200 kilograms / over 400 lbs] or so. From the vat came the sweet smell of wine, obviously it was filled with expensive wine, which without a doubt added a lot more weight to the vat. But he did not seem to be using any strength in his arm at all. Every step he took the floorboards moaned and bent from the weight. Panic engulfed the bottom level as the owner, waiters, cooks, all the patrons and everyone else scrambled out, fearing that the entire floor would collapse on top of them.

Coldly, the monk Jiaomu spoke up: "I am honored that my Taoist brother would show himself here, but what's the point in bringing the paper burning vat from our humble little temple? Let me introduce you to the Seven Heroes of the South!" Qiu Chuji made a respectful gesture with his left hand and said: "This humble Taoist has just visited your holy temple where I heard from the other monks that the Venerable Monk was inviting me for a drink at Pavilion of the Drunken Immortal. I figured that you would have undoubtedly invited some other friends; it turns out I was right. I have long admired the Seven Heroes of the South; I am fortunate today to make your acquaintance." Monk Jiaomu turned to the seven people and said: "This is elder 'Changchun Zi' Qiu Chuji of the Quanzhen Sect, I'm sure everyone has heard of him." Turning around to Qiu Chuji, he pointed at the blind man and continued, "This is the head of the Seven Heroes, the hero Ke, 'Flying Bat Soaring through the Sky' Ke Zhen'E." He followed by introducing the others, all the while Wanyan Honglie giving this all of his attention and memorizing their names. Number two in rank was that poor and downtrodden looking scholar that stole his money, named 'Magic Hands Scholar' Zhu Cong. The fat, short fellow that arrived first was 'Horse God' Han Baoju, he ranked third. The peasant that carried the load of firewood was number four; his name was 'Wood Chopper of the Southern Mountains' Nan Xiren. Ranked number five was that huge man that looked like a butcher, 'Smiling Dhuda' Zhang Ahsheng. The little fellow that looked like a merchant was surnamed Quan, Jinfa was his given name, and his nickname was 'Hidden Hero of the Bustling City'. The fisher girl was called 'Yue Maiden Sword' Han Xiaoying, obviously the youngest of the seven Heroes.

All the while the monk Jiaomu was introducing everyone, Qiu Chuji would very respectfully bow a little as a sign of respect, but his right hand was still holding up the vat and



there was no sign of fatigue at all. A few of the braver ones of the people downstairs saw that there was no immediate danger and actually walked back in to see what was going on.

Ke Zhen'E spoke up: "People call us seven brothers and sister the Seven Freaks because we are a rather odd collection of characters; we dare not assume the name 'Seven Heroes' that the monk Jiaomu called us. All of us have long admired the famed Seven Masters of Quanzhen, especially the elder 'Changchun Zi', who's many chivalrous deeds we have all heard of. The monk Jiaomu is a most warm and friendly man; we can't understand how he could have offended elder Qiu. If the elder thinks anything of us, then please let the seven of us be a mediator for the dispute. Besides, even though Taoism and Buddhism worship different types of deities, you two gentlemen are still both monks or priests and members of the martial world. Why don't we forgive and forget so we can just gather here and have a nice little drink together?"

Qiu Chuji replied: "I have never met the Venerable Monk Jiaomu before, nor is there any gratitude or grudges between the two of us. As long as he hands over two people, then I personally will immediately go to the Fahua Monastery to ask for forgiveness." Ke Zhen'E asked: "Which two people?" Qiu Chuji replied: "I have two very good friends who were killed by corrupt officials working with the Jin. Their widows are all alone in the world. Hero Ke, do you think that I should step into this matter?" When Wanyan Honglie heard this, the cup in his hand suddenly shook and some wine spilled onto the table. Ke Zhen'E replied: "It wouldn't even matter if they are widows of the monk's good friends. Even if none of us have ever met them, if we knew about something like this happening, we would step in and do the best we can to take care of them.

This is something that should be done without any hesitation." Qiu Chuji loudly replied: "That's right! I just want the monk Jiaomu to hand those two widows over to me! He is a monk, how could he keep two widows in his monastery and not hand them over? The Seven Heroes here are reasonable and righteous people; please do the right thing!" When he finished saying this, not only were the monk Jiaomu and the Seven Freaks shocked, Wanyan Honglie was quite surprised as well. He thought: "Is he not talking about Madame Yang and Madame Guo but someone else?"

The monk Jiaomu's face was burnt yellowish to begin with, now it was even more burnt looking. He could not bring himself to reply for a while as he could only stammer: "You... you... are talking nonsense... nonsense..."

Qiu Chuji was furious: "You are a man of the martial world too, how dare you do such a shameful deed!" He pushed with his right hand and the several hundred kilogram heavy vat with the wine in it went flying towards the monk Jiaomu. The monk immediately jumped aside.

The people that gathered at the end of the stairs were frightened out of their wits and all of them turned around and pushed their way down the stairs in a panic.

'Smiling Buddha' Zhang Ahsheng figured that, although the vat was heavy, he would still be able to handle it with his strength. So he stepped up, channeled some inner strength into his arms, and waited until the vat arrived before he, with a shout, grabbed a hold of it. The muscles on his back and his shoulders bulged out as he was actually able to control the vat all by himself. As he lifted the vat up over his head, the amount of force exerted under his feet was too great and with one loud 'crack', his left foot went through the floorboards, causing the crowd downstairs to scream.

Zhang Ahsheng took two steps forward, bent his arms slightly, and, with the move 'Opening the Windows to View the Moon'; he threw the vat back at Qiu Chuji. Qiu Chuji caught the vat with his right hand and laughed: "The Seven Freaks of the South are just like the rumors say, very deserving of their fame!" Then his expression darkened as he turned to the monk Jiaomu: "What happened to those two widows? You are forcing two widows to live in your monastery, what for? If you dare to touch a single strand of their hair, I'll smash your bones until they are dust and burn down that monastery of yours!" Zhu Cong flicked his fan and said while shaking his head: "The monk Jiaomu is an honorable and respected monk, how could he do such a shameful thing? Elder Qiu must have heard of this from someone shameless and despicable. This kind of gossip can't be trusted."

Qiu Chuji was still furious: "I saw it with my own eyes, how could it be untrue?" The Seven Freaks were surprised by this. The monk Jiaomu finally spoke up: "If you want to come here and make a name for yourself here south of the Yangtze, that's fine. But you don't need to drag my name through the dirt... you... you... go out into Jiaxing and ask around, see how many people think I would do such a thing?" Qiu Chuji snickered: "Alright, you've got helpers and want to win by sheer numbers. I am involved in this matter now, so there's no way you can get away from this. You are using the sacred ground of your deity to hide women, that's bad already, but the women's husbands are the descendants of patriots and they were murdered."

Ke Zhen'E spoke up: "Elder Qiu accused monk Jiaomu of hiding two women, but monk Jiaomu denies it. Why don't all of us go to the temple and see who's right and who's not. Although I'm blind, my ears are still working fine." His six brothers and sister immediately agreed with him.

Qiu Chuji sneered: "Search the temple? I have already searched it inside and out. But two women walked in and apparently disappeared. The only possibility is that he hid them. I will forget this if the monk hands them over." Zhu Cong replied: "What if it turns out that those two women aren't women." Qiu Chuji was confused: "What?" Zhu Cong answered with a straight face: "They are fairies and either know how to become invisible or become one with the earth!" The other Six Freaks couldn't help but laugh at that remark. Qiu Chuji was furious: "So you are mocking me? Alright, it seems like you people are taking the monk's side, true?"

Ke Zhen'E righteously replied: "Although our martial arts might be laughable in the eyes of a master from the Quanzhen Sect, we still have a bit of a name here south of the Yangtze. Ask around, people will say: 'The Seven Freaks of the South? They may be crazy, but they are not cowards.' We wouldn't dare bully others, but we can't let others bully us either." Qiu Chuji replied: "I have heard much about the good name of the Seven Heroes of the South. This matter does not concern you so please do not get involved in this sticky matter. Let this monk and I settle it between us. Monk, follow me." He reached out toward the monk Jiaomu's wrist. Monk Jiaomu dipped his wrist and dodged this move. Seeing that the two of them have started to fight, 'Horse God' Han Baoju shouted: "Reverend Qiu, why are you being so unreasonable?" Qiu Chuji stepped back and asked: "What do you mean?" Han Baoju replied: "We trust the monk Jiaomu, if he says there aren't any women then there really aren't any women. Which man living in the martial world would lie?" Qiu Chuji replied: "If he isn't lying, then am I causing him trouble for no reason whatsoever? I saw it with my own eyes! If I'm wrong then I'll dig out these two eyeballs and give them to you. I am definitely going to see this to the end. It seems like the seven of you are

definitely getting involved right?" The Seven Freaks answered simultaneously: "Right!"

Qiu Chuji replied: "Alright, I'll drink a toast of wine to all seven heroes. Let the fight get started after we are finished toasting." He dipped his right hand and lowered the vat to his mouth. After taking a good gulp, he shouted: "If you please!" With one flick of the hand, the vat went flying towards Zhang Ahsheng again.

Zhang Ahsheng thought to himself: "If I catch it over my head like I did last time, then it would be impossible for me to drink out of it wouldn't it?" So he took two steps back, held his hands in front of his chest, and waited for the vat. Once it arrived, he threw his arms to the side and let the vat hit him straight in the chest. He was born chubby so his chest was covered with layers upon layers of fat and muscle, which acted like a cushion as the vat hit his chest. He immediately took a deep breath, flexed his chest muscles, brought his arms along the side of the vat, and caught the vat. He then lowered his head and took a huge gulp of the wine: "Excellent Wine!" He praised as he suddenly retracted his arms back to the front of his chest and, before the vat could fall onto the floor, executed the move 'Mountain Moving Double Palms', sending the vat flying back towards Qiu Chuji. This move was quick, powerful, and fast, obviously a move from a master of martial arts moves. Wanyan Honglie was secretly shocked by what he had just witnessed.

Qiu Chuji caught the vat and took another gulp before shouting: "A toast to Big Brother Ke!" And the vat went flying towards Ke Zhen'E.

A thought shot across Wanyan Honglie's mind: "This man is blind, how is he supposed to catch it?" But it turned out that not only was Ke Zhen'E the head of the Seven Freaks, his

martial arts were also the best and he could easily tell where the smallest of weapons were from the sound they made, so this huge vat was no problem for him. He just calmly sat there as if he didn't notice anything until the vat was just about to hit his head. Only then did he suddenly raise his right arm and hit the bottom of the vat with his staff. That vat spun endlessly at the top of the staff, just like those plates at the end of an acrobat's stick. Suddenly his iron staff moved a little off-center and the vat began to lean as if it was going to fall onto his head. For some reason the vat could not fall over and it stayed there, tilted. As the wine in the vat poured out of it in a neat little steam, Ke Zhen'E opened his mouth and the wine flowed neatly into it. After taking three or four mouthfuls, his iron staff moved and was again in the middle of the vat bottom. He pushed his staff upwards and the vat flew straight up; with a swing of the staff, he smacked the vat back towards Qiu Chuji with a loud "Bang!" The echoes could still be heard when Qiu Chuji caught it again.

Laughing, Qiu Chuji commented: "Hero Ke must like to spin plates in his spare time." Ke Zhen'E coldly answered: "When I was little, I used to live off of the money I got from that little trick." Qiu Chuji observed: "Not forgetting where he comes from is the sign of a real man! Fourth Brother Nan, a toast!" He took another gulp from the vat and threw it at him.

Nan Xiren didn't say a word as he waited for the vat to arrive and then lifted his carrying stick to block. 'Dang'! The vat was stopped cold in mid-air and began to fall. Nan Xiren cupped his hand, scooped up some wine from the vat, and downed it. While holding his carrying stick flat, he knelt down on his right knee with the middle of the carrying stick resting on his left knee. He pushed down on one end of the

stick with his right hand and caught the bottom of the vat with the other end, flicking the vat up in the air once again.

He was just about to hit the vat back to Qiu Chuji when the 'Hidden Hero of the Bustling City' Quan Jinfa laughed and said: "I make a living selling stuff, so I like taking advantage. I might as well get a bit of wine without doing anything." He ran up to Nan Xiren's side and, when the vat fell back down again, scooped up a bit of wine and downed it. Suddenly he jumped up, curled his legs so that the bottom of both of his feet were on the vat, and as he pushed in midair, he caused his body to take off like an arrow and the vat to fly off in the opposite direction towards Qiu Chuji. His body landed on the side of the wall and he lightly clambered down. The fan in 'Magical Hands Scholar' Zhu Cong's hand did not stop flicking and he could not stop from commenting: "Beautiful, beautiful!"

Qiu Chuji caught the vat and took another big gulp before saying: "Wonderful, wonderful! And now a toast to Brother Zhu!" Zhu Cong shouted in desperation: "Aiyo! Don't do that! I'm not even strong enough to subdue a chicken, and I can't hold my alcohol at all! I'll surely drink to death if I'm not squashed to death first..." Before he finished, the vat was already heading his way. Zhu Cong was shouting at the top of his lungs: "Someone's going to be smashed to death! Help! Help..." He made a scoop with his fan into the vat and brought it up to his mouth. Then he turned the fan around and hit the bottom of the vat with it and sent it flying off. "Crack!" The floorboards beneath him suddenly collapsed, forming a huge hole in the floor and he fell through it, all the while screaming: "Help! Help!" Everyone present knew that he was just playing around so nobody was really surprised or worried. Wanyan Honglie however, seeing that he was able to flick away a huge vat with a small fan and

with a force that was no weaker than that which came from Nan Xiren's stick, was once again shocked.

The 'Yue Sword Maiden' Han Xiaoying shouted: "My turn for a drink!" She hopped off with her right foot and she took off like a bird. Just as she flew over the top of the vat, she lowered her head and took a gulp before nimbly and gently landing on the windowsill on the opposite side of the room. She was skilled at Qing Gong [lightness kung fu] and swordplay but her strength wasn't up to par with the others; she figured that there was no way she would be able to catch this vat when it came flying toward her. Tossing it back towards Qiu Chuji was even further out of the question; so she seized the opportunity and took her turn using her Qing Gong.

Meanwhile the vat was still flying out the window and into the street. With the street crowded as it was, it would be disastrous if the vat landed outside. Qiu Chuji was a bit worried and was just about to jump out onto the street to catch it. He suddenly heard a whistle as a person in yellow ran past him. Another whistle and the yellow horse that was downstairs ran out onto the street.

To the people gathered around, it looked as if the huge ball of meat suddenly hit the vat and fell as one with it. The ball of meat and the vat both landed on the back of the yellow horse. The yellow horse ran forward a couple of zhangs [1 zhang = 3.3 meters or 10+ feet] before turning around and running back into the pavilion and up the stairs.

The 'Horse God' Han Baoju's body was actually underneath the belly of the horse with his left foot in the stirrup and his right foot and both of his hands were holding the vat, balancing it neatly on the saddle. The horse was fast and steady, as if the stairs were flat ground to him. Han Baoju jumped back onto the horse, he put his head into the vat



and took a huge mouthful before pushing the vat off onto the floor of the room with his left hand. Letting out a hearty laugh, he cracked his whip and the horse jumped out of the window and, like a Pegasus, gently landed in the middle of the street. Han Baoju jumped off his horse and walked back up the stairs along with Zhu Cong.

Qiu Chuji complimented: "The 'Seven Heroes of the South' are really as good as the rumors say! I am speechless at the display of martial arts I have just seen. Giving the Seven Heroes face, I promise not to cause this monk anymore trouble if he hands over the two women and I will leave at once when he has."

Ke Zhen'E replied: "Elder Qiu, you are in the wrong here. The monk Jiaomu has been meditating and has cleansed of worldly emotions for several decades now, he is a truly enlightened monk. He is someone that all of us have admired for a long time. The Fahua Monastery [Temple of Oriental Zen] is also one of the famous sacred Buddhist landmarks here in the city of Jiaxingg. How could any females, not to mention widows, possibly be hidden inside it?" Qiu Chuji replied: "In this world, there are always those people who are hypocrites and do not deserve their reputations." Trying to control his anger, Han Baoju shouted back: "So is the elder saying that he doesn't believe us?" Qiu Chuji replied just as loudly: "I much rather believe my very own eyes." Han Baoju replied: "So what is elder Qiu planning to do now?" Even though he was short, he still was quite intimidating and heroic in his own way because of his loud and clear voice.

Qiu Chuji replied: "This matter originally had nothing to do with you seven, but since you are insisting on jumping into this matter, you are obviously quite confident of your abilities. Forgive me for daring to challenge the Seven Heroes; if I lose, then I'll do as everyone here wishes." Ke

Zhen'E replied: "If the elder insists on going through with this, then would the Reverend please choose how we should settle this matter."

Qiu Chuji thought for a moment and said: "We never had any grudges previously nor have we ever wronged each other. I have long admired the heroic name and reputation of the Seven Heroes of the South. I don't think any of us want to start fighting with swords or fists, so how about this?" He shouted: "Inn keeper! Bring fourteen big bowls!"

The innkeeper had been hiding on the floor below, but upon hearing his instructions and noticing that it had been quiet for a while upstairs, he immediately went to bring the bowls up.

Qiu Chuji instructed him to place the bowls in two rows and fill them to the brim with wine. Turning to the Seven Freaks, he said: "I challenge everyone to a drinking contest. For every bowl you guys drink, I will drink one as well until there is a winner. What do you say?"

Han Baoju and Zhang Ahsheng were both huge drinkers, so they immediately agreed without any hesitation. Ke Zhen'E frowned and replied: "This is one against seven; even if we win we didn't win it fairly. Could Reverend please choose something else?" Qiu Chuji frowned: "What makes you so sure that you'll beat me?"

Even though Han Xiaoying was a girl, she was still quite macho, so she immediately answered back: "Alright, let's go at it then! This is the first time I have met someone that dares to look down at us so much." As she talked she grabbed a bowl of wine and downed it in one breath. It was obvious she drank it too quickly as her face flushed red immediately.

Qiu Chuji complimented: "Miss Han really is a man among females! Everyone... please!" The other six of the Seven Freaks each picked up a bowl and drank it. Qiu Chuji responded by downing seven bowls of wine in an instant; each with just one gulp and without a single pause for breath in between. The innkeeper immediately shouted praise for everyone and filled up the fourteen bowls, which the eight finished off immediately.

By the third round of drinks, Han Xiaoying could only drink half a bowl before having to pause because her hands were shaking. Zhang Ahsheng took the bowl out of her hand: "Sister, I'll finish this for you." Han Xiaoying inquired: "Elder Qiu is that alright?" Qiu Chuji replied without hesitation: "Of course, it doesn't matter who drinks it as long as it is seven bowls." Another round and Quan Jinfa had to back out as well.

Seeing that after twenty-eight bowls Qiu Chuji was still looking sober and normal, the Seven Freaks were quite shocked. Wanyan Honglie thought as he looked on: "Hopefully this Taoist will get drunk and these Seven Freaks will finish him off before he can do anything."

Quan Jinfa calculated that his side still had five men left, each a heavy drinker and could probably drink three or four more rounds, the opponent could not possibly be able to hold another twenty or so drinks in his belly... or could he? Even if he really could not get drunk, his belly could only hold so much. Figuring that victory was in hand, he was feeling pretty good; then he accidentally glanced down at the floor and saw that the floorboards under Qiu Chuji's feet were obviously soaked through. Shocked, he whispered to Zhu Cong: "Second Brother, take a look at his feet." Zhu Cong only looked down for a moment before muttering: "Not good, he's using his inner strength to force the wine out through his feet." Quan Jinfa quietly replied: "That's

right; I didn't think that his inner strength would be so powerful, what should we do now?"

Zhu Cong thought to himself: "With this little trick, he could go a hundred more bowls without any problem. I have to come up with another contest or something." He took a step back before suddenly falling through the hole in the floorboards that he caused earlier and then climbing back up through the hole, all the while shouting: "So drunk, I am so drunk!"

Another round of drinks and now the floor boards under Qiu Chuji's feet were saturated with wine and a little bit of a fountain squirted out from the boards onto the floor below. By now Nan Xiren, Han Baoju, and everyone else had noticed, and everyone was secretly admiring such a powerful display of inner strength.

Han Baoju put his bowl back onto the table and was just about to admit defeat when Zhu Cong shot him a look and turned to Qiu Chuji: "Elder's inner strength is almost god-like and we can't but admire such a display. But it is still five against one; it doesn't seem quite fair really." Qiu Chuji was a bit surprised and asked: "Then what does Second Brother Zhu suggest we should do?" Zhu Cong smiled and said: "I say let the two of us battle it out to see who's best."

All the spectators were rather baffled by this; Zhu Cong was the one, of the group of five still going up against him, who was obviously losing, why would he go and lower his odds even more? But the other six Freaks knew that although this brother of theirs doesn't seem to take anything seriously, he's full of ideas and tricks and his actions were often pure genius. Figuring that he must have a plan in mind, the six of them didn't object.

Qiu Chuji let out a little laugh: "The Seven Freaks of the South really do want to look good no matter what. How about this? If Second Brother Zhu finishes the wine left in this vat with me, if neither is losing, then it'll count as a defeat for me...how about it?"

By now the vat was a little bit less than half full, with many bowls remaining; this would mean that only two drunken Buddha's with their big bellies could hold all of it. But Zhu Cong didn't seem to mind that as he smiled and said: "Although I am not a very big drinker, I once beat several pretty big drinkers during one of my adventures. A toast," he said waving his fan in his right hand and his left shirt sleeve, he downed a bowl.

So the two of them downed one bowl after another; in between drinks, Qiu Chuji asked: "What kind of big drinkers?" Zhu Cong replied: "Well, once I traveled to India and the king dragged out a water buffalo to challenge me in a drinking match. But in the end neither of us won or lost."

Knowing that Zhu Cong was poking fun at him, he just snorted in response and downed another bowl. However, he noticed that even though Zhu Cong was waving his hands all over the place while talking nonsense, he was still matching him bowl for bowl. There wasn't any wine spilling out from his hands or feet, so obviously was not forcing the wine out of his body with inner strength; but there was a huge bulge in his stomach so he figured that Zhu Cong may know how to expand and retract his stomach at will. He was feeling rather puzzled when Zhu Cong spoke up again: "The year before last I went to Siam, ha, now that's even more ridiculous. This time the King of Siam got an elephant to challenge me. That huge thing drank seven vats! How much do you think I drank?"

Even though Qiu Chuji knew he was just making stuff up, he

could not help but ask: "How much?" Zhu Cong's face suddenly turned dead serious as he lowered his voice and said: "Nine vats!" Suddenly he raised his voice again and shouted: "Drink up, drink up!"

So he just went on like this, sort of drunk but not really, kind of crazy but kind of not, and soon the two of them had finished off the entire vat. The rest of the Freaks had no idea that he could hold all of that wine and all of them were pleasantly surprised.

Qiu Chuji gave him thumbs up: "Brother Zhu really is amazing!"

With a smile, Zhu Cong replied: "To keep the wine out of our bodies, Reverend used inner strength, but I had to resort to merely outer techniques. Here, have a look." With a hearty laugh, he suddenly did a back flip and when he landed there was a wooden bucket in his hand. With a slight wave of his hand, the fragrances of the wine that filled half the bucket came pouring out. All of the people present were martial arts masters and, with the exception of Ke Zhen'E, were sharp enough to pick up on any trickery or fake moves, yet not a single one of saw where the bucket came from. Looking down, Zhu Cong's belly had suddenly returned to its normal flat shape; obviously the bucket was hidden underneath his robe. The Seven Freaks of the South all burst out laughing and Qiu Chuji was shocked.

As it turns out, Zhu Cong was best at trickery and illusions and that was where the nickname 'Magical Hands Scholar' came from. This little trick that he just pulled was passed down by magicians all the way to today. A magician would walk onto the stage with nothing in hand, with one back flip a goldfish bowl would be in his hand, another back flip and a bowl filled with water appeared; this would go on until there were enough bowls on stage and suddenly there was

one goldfish in each bowl. This is absolutely astounding when witnessed first hand and has to be seen to be believed. The second time Zhu Cong fell through the hole was when he hid the large bucket underneath his robe. All the crazy talk was to distract Qiu Chuji. When a magician does his trick right, even hundreds upon hundreds of pairs of eyes could not spot how the trick was done. Qiu Chuji did not even suspect that he would be pulling this kind of trick and was not able to catch him pouring one bowl after another into the bucket underneath his robe. Qiu Chuji snorted: "Hmph! You call this drinking?" Zhu Cong laughed: "And what you did was? The wine I drank is in this bucket, the wine that you drank is on the floor, any differences there?"

He paced back and forth as he talked, suddenly he accidentally slipped on the puddle of wine by Qiu Chuji's feet and fell towards Qiu Chuji. Qiu Chuji caught him and let Zhu Cong balance himself. After pacing back and forth once more, he suddenly said in a loud voice: "Wonderful poem! Such wonderful poetry! Mid-Autumn have always... moon most bright, cool winds lead the way... for refreshing night. A day's fortunes... sinks man and silver, the dragons in four seas... leap out water...." His voice was slowly dragging out as he began to sing the lines.

Shocked, Qiu Chuji thought to himself: "That's the poem that I started but didn't finish last Mid-Autumn; I always have it by my side in case I ever think of the next four lines. Nobody else has seen it, how does he know it?" Reaching into his shirt, he found that the scroll that contained the poem was missing.

With a smile, Zhu Cong unrolled the scroll and laid it out on the table: "Not only are elder Qiu's martial arts among the best in the world, his poetry and style is as well. Amazing... truly amazing!" He had slipped and fallen on purpose,

enabling him to use those magical pick-pocket skills of his to steal the scroll from Qiu Chuji.

Qiu Chuji thought to himself: "I didn't notice it at all when he reached into my shirt and took the scroll out. If he didn't intend to take my poem but was instead trying to stab me, would I still be alive now? Obviously he had my life in his hands and let me live." Now that he thought about that, the anger in him subsided and he said: "Since Hero Zhu has finished this entire vat of wine with me, I will do as I promised and admit defeat. In this little match today in the Pavilion of the Drunken Immortal, Qiu Chuji lost to the Seven Heroes of the South."

Amid smiles, the Seven Freaks of the South replied: "No, no, that's ok. This kind of game can't be taken seriously." Zhu Cong added: "Besides, Reverend Qiu's inner strength is miles above all of us."

Qiu Chuji continued: "Although I have admitted defeat, those two widows have to be rescued." He saluted with his hands and lifted up the vat: "I'm heading off to the Fahua Monastery to get them." An angry, Ke Zhen'E demanded: "You have admitted defeat, why are you still troubling monk Jiaomu?" Qiu Chuji replied: "Lives are at stake, it has nothing to do with winning or losing. Honored Hero Ke, if your friend met an unfortunate end and his widow was suffering in the hands of others, would you do all you could to save them?" Suddenly his expression changed and he shouted: "Oh I see how it is, you had more people coming! Even if you get the entire Jin army here I'm still going to see this to the very end, even if it means giving up my life!"

Zhang Ahsheng replied: "There's just the seven of us, no need for more people." But Ke Zhen'E had heard several dozen of men running in this direction as well as the clanking of their weapons, so he immediately stood up and



commanded: "Everyone back off!" Zhang Ahsheng and all the others hid their weapons since all of them had heard the footsteps by now. Before long, several dozen men came running up the stairs.

These men were Jin soldiers. Qiu Chuji respected the Seven Freaks of the South and figured that they were being kept in the dark by the lies of the monk Jiaomu. He was careful of what he said so as not to offend them too much. But suddenly seeing dozens of Jin soldiers showing up, he could not control his anger any longer and he shouted: "Monk Jiaomu, Seven Freaks, how dare you people actually befriend someone, then ask the Jin for help against them! How can you still call yourself righteous men of the martial world?" Han Baoju shouted back: "Who's asking the Jin for help?"

These soldiers were actually the personal guards of Wanyan Honglie; they followed him into town and became unsettled because Wanyan Honglie had been out of sight a long time. Upon hearing that there was fighting in the Pavilion of the Drunken Immortal and fearing the worst, they came running.

Qiu Chuji snorted: "Hmph! Alright, alright! Please forgive me for not staying any longer! This matter between us is not over yet!" He picked up his vat and started to walk toward the stairs.

Ke Zhen'E stood back up: " Reverend Qiu, there's some misunderstanding here." Still walking, Qiu Chuji replied: "Misunderstanding? You people are supposedly righteous heroes? Why ask Jin soldiers to help you in a fight?" Ke Zhen'E replied: "But we didn't." Qiu Chuji rebuked: "I can see what's going on in front of me, I'm not blind." What Ke Zhen'E hated the most was the fact that he was blind and anything that reminded him of it. He slammed his iron staff

onto the floor and demanded: "And what if I am blind?" Qiu Chuji didn't answer as he lifted up his left hand and struck a Jin soldier on his forehead with his palm. The soldier did not even have a chance to mutter a sound before his head split open. Qiu Chuji shouted back: "He is a good example!" Flipping his sleeves in the Seven Freaks' general direction, he walked down the stairs.

Seeing one of their own die, the Jin soldier's actions immediately became chaotic as several of them charged at Qiu Chuji with lances pointed at his back. He did not even turn around and, as if there were eyes on the back of his head, he knocked each of the lances down one by one. The rest of the soldiers were just about to charge up from below as well when Wanyan Honglie ordered them to stop. Turning to Ke Zhen'E, he said: "This Taoist bastard is intolerable, why don't all of us sit down and have a nice drink while we discuss how to take care of him?" When he ordered the Jin soldiers to stop, Ke Zhen'E had figured out that he was the leader of the soldiers, so he shouted back: "Damn it [TaMaDe]! Get out of my face!" Wanyan Honglie hadn't even recovered from this shock when Han Baoju added: "My Big Brother told you to get out of his face!" He bumped Wanyan Honglie on his waist with his right shoulder. Wanyan Honglie stumbled back several steps as the Seven Freaks and the monk Jiaomu quickly filed out.

Zhu Cong was trailing behind them. As he walked by Wanyan Honglie, he gently tapped him on the shoulder with his fan and asked with a smile: "Have you sold off that girl? How about selling her to me? Ha...ha!" As he hurried down the steps he was still laughing. Although Zhu Cong did not know anything about Wanyan Honglie, he could tell from the way that he was treating Bao Xiruo that they were not a couple. Then he overheard him bragging about his wealth, so he had to take a bit of his money, just to cause a little

trouble. But now that he found out that he's a leader of Jin soldiers, how could he not take more of his money?

Wanyan Honglie reached into his shirt and, as expected, all the money that was in his shirt had, inexplicably, disappeared. Not only was he worried about the fact that all these men were such great martial arts masters, but if they somehow found out that he had Madame Bao with him, what a disaster that would be? Luckily, since Qiu Chuji and the Seven Freaks still haven't worked out their misunderstanding, this was the perfect time for him to get out of town. He immediately went back to the inn and headed north with Bao Xiruo that very night. They traveled until they arrived back at the capital of the Jin Empire, Yanjing. [Modern day Beijing]

As it turned out, after that night in which Qiu Chuji killed Wang Daoqian and met the two men, then killed another group of Jin soldiers, he arrived in Hangzhou in great spirits. He spent several days in a row by the lake. The Ge Peak at the north end of the West Lake, besides being a famous Taoist retreat, it was the place where Ge Hong concocted his medical pills at that time. Qiu Chuji spent his mornings enjoying the land and the people and his afternoons inside the Taoist temple on top of Ge Peak, making medicine and practicing martial arts.

One day, he was walking on a pier on the shore of Qing River when he suddenly saw a group of ten or so government soldiers walking by in a very sorry state with their armor falling apart and their weapons broken. Obviously they had just lost a battle. He was rather puzzled: "We aren't at war with the Jin nowadays, and I haven't heard anything about any ruffians or uprisings around here. Where in the world did they lose this battle?" He asked around but nobody knew about it either. His curiosity

piqued, he followed the soldiers back to their camp, at Command Post Six.

He waited until after midnight before he snuck into the camp and dragged a soldier out into a small alley to interrogate him. That soldier was in the middle of a dream when suddenly, out of nowhere, a sharp blade was put up against his throat. In shock and fear, he did not hide a thing and he spilled all the secrets about going into Ox Village to capture two men and everything else that happened that night. Qiu Chuji could not believe it when that soldier told him that Guo Xiaotian had died that night, and Yang Tiexin, gravely wounded, was missing and most likely dead as well. The soldier kept on saying that the two widows had been captured, but on their way back, out of nowhere, they had run into another group of soldiers and, for some weird and stupid reason, they fought and lost. Qiu Chuji was about to lose his temper when he realized that this man was merely a soldier who was following orders and not truly responsible for what happened. So he demanded: "Who's your superior?" The soldier answered: "The commander's... s... surname is Duan, given name Tiande." Qiu Chuji let him go and snuck back trying to find Duan Tiande, but to no avail.

The next morning, a pole was erected in front of the commander's house; a head was dangling off of the top of it, as a warning to other criminals. Qiu Chuji only took one look and recognized that it belonged to Guo Xiaotian. In sadness and anger, he thought: "Qiu Chuji, Qiu Chuji, this man is a descendent of a patriot. Out of kindness, he asked you to have a drink with him, yet you brought upon him such calamities. If you do not find justice for him, how can you go on pretending to be a man?"

After forcing himself to wait until nightfall, he climbed up the pole and took down Guo Xiaotian's head. He dug a hole

on the shore of the West Lake and buried the head there. After several kowtows, he wiped the tears away from his face as he silently swore: "I promised to teach the two hero's children martial arts. I've kept every promise I have ever made and if I can not turn your children into heroes among men, then let me never see my brothers in the afterlife; I will no longer deserve such an honor." He calculated that the first thing he needed to do was find that Duan Tiande and get revenge for his two dead sworn brothers. After that he would rescue the two widows and take them to some place safe, so that the two kids could be born and leave a legacy for those two heroes.

For two straight nights, he searched through Command Post 6, but was not able to find Duan Tiande at all. He became worried that this man, because of greed and corruption, did not follow military regulations and might not spend time with the soldiers under him at all. On the third night, he stepped out in front of the command post and shouted: "Duan Tiande! Come out here this instant!"

Because of the fact that Guo Xiaotian's head had been taken, Duan Tiande was inside interrogating Li Ping about any other criminal masterminds that her husband might know when, suddenly, there was chaos outside. He stuck his head out of a window and saw a big, tall Taoist, with incredible ferocity and style, grabbing a soldier with each hand and tossing them out of the way as he made his way through the crowd of soldiers. One of the commanders repeatedly shouted: "Let loose the arrows! Let loose!" In the chaos, some of the soldiers grabbed a bow but couldn't find any arrows while other soldiers gathered some arrows but did not grab a bow.

Furious, Duan Tiande pulled out his saber and charged forward screaming: "Want to rebel?" He swung at Qiu Chuji's waist. Seeing that he was an officer, Qiu Chuji did

not budge at all. Instead he tossed aside the soldier that was in his hands and, with one simple motion of his left hand, grabbed Duan Tiande's wrist and demanded: "Where's that bastard Duan Tiande?"

Writhing in pain, Duan Tiande immediately replied: "Is the Reverend looking for Mr. Duan? He... He's drinking by the West Lake; don't know if he's going to make it back today." Believing him, Qiu Chuji let him go. Duan Tiande turned to two soldiers by his side and ordered: "Take the Reverend to the lake shore so that he can find the commander." The two soldiers didn't catch on, so he shouted: "What are you standing there for? Hurry! The Reverend will get mad!" The two men finally caught on and began walking. Qiu Chuji followed them off.

Not daring to stay a moment longer, Duan Tiande took several guards and Li Ping and headed straight towards the 8th Command Post. The commander was his drinking pal and, upon hearing what had happened, immediately offered to dispatch some help for him to catch this Taoist bastard. He was just about to dispatch his troops when his camp suddenly broke out in chaos as one of the soldiers ran in and reported that a Taoist had come charging into camp. Turned out the soldiers that were with him couldn't take the pressure and told him about the places that Duan Tiande frequently went to.

Being the alert man he was, Duan Tiande did not hesitate and he grabbed Li Ping and ran. He ran to the 2nd Command Post outside of the city, figuring that he could lose Qiu Chuji because of its remote location. After he settled down, the images of that Taoist rampaging through the army haunted him. By this time his wrist began to hurt and swell again. He went to an army doctor in the camp and it turned out that two bones in his wrist had actually snapped. Too frightened to go home, he decided to stay in

the 2nd Command Post for the night. He slept till midnight when a disturbance outside woke him up, apparently one of the soldiers standing guard had disappeared.

Duan Tiande jumped out of his bed, somehow knowing that the guard must have been kidnapped by that Taoist. Deciding that no matter where he hides in the army camps, the Taoist would eventually find him, he had to find something else to do! This Taoist had already met him and was only coming for him and him alone. Even though there were lots of soldiers in the army, he was probably not going to come out unscratched. He was about to break down in a panic when he suddenly remembered that his uncle, whose martial arts were quite good, had retreated to the Yunlou Temple [Cloudy Pavilion Temple] to become a monk. Why not hide there? Figuring that this Taoist's attacks probably had something to do with Guo Xiaotian, he ordered Li Ping be changed into a soldier's uniform and then dragged her to the Yunlou Temple with him in the middle of the night. He thought that if he really got into trouble he could use her as leverage against the monk.

His uncle, given the Buddhist name of Kumu [Withered Wood], became a monk a long time ago and had become the Abbot of the Yunlou Temple. Before that he had been an army officer and his martial arts training came as a disciple of Xianxia Sect that was prevalent in the provinces of Zhejiang and Jiangsu and could be considered a branch of Shaolin martial arts. He had never approved of Duan Tiande's character and kept a distance between them. Seeing him stumbling into the monastery in such a sorry state in the middle of the night, he was quite annoyed and asked coldly: "What are you doing here?"

Knowing that his uncle hated the Jin to the bone, Duan Tiande knew that if he told the truth his uncle might kill him on the spot himself, so on the way here he had already

thought of a lie. Seeing his uncle's cold stare at this moment, he immediately knelt down and kowtowed: "Someone is troubling me, please help me uncle!"

Buddhist monk Kumu replied: "You are an army officer; it's a miracle if you don't go troubling others, who would dare to trouble you?" With an innocent look on his face, Duan Tiande replied: "I'm no good, but I'm hiding here and there from this Taoist bastard. I hope that uncle will, for the sake of late father, save me." Out of pity, the monk Kumu asked him: "Why is the Taoist chasing you?"

Duan Tiande knew that the more repentant he sounded the better off he was, so he said: "It's all my fault... my fault! Two days ago I went to the Wah-Zi on the west side of Clear Coolness Bridge...." The Abbot Kumu snorted and his face dropped. "Wah She", or "Wah-Zi", was the slang word for brothels back at that time; from that came the saying "Wahs gather when time comes, wahs scatters when time goes", which is used to describe something that comes easily and goes just as fast.

Duan Tiande continued: "There was someone there that I had met on many occasions and she was in the middle of a song when a Taoist suddenly burst in and said that she had to entertain him because her song was so good...." Abbot Kumu abruptly cut in: "Bull! What is a priest doing in a place like that?" Duan Tiande replied: "That's what I said and then I told him to leave. But it turned out that Taoist was a low-life and cursed me for enjoying myself in spite of the fact that I would lose my head in the next couple of days." Abbot Kumu asked: "What is he talking about?" Duan Tiande replied: "He said that the Jin army was going to cross the river and invade south soon and was going to kill every single one of us Song soldiers."



Furious, Buddhist Abbot Kumu demanded: "Did he really say that?" Duan Tiande nodded: "Yes! I guess my temper was not really good either and I got into an argument with him, saying that if the Jin really did invade, we would at least all die fighting and wouldn't necessarily lose." This really rubbed the Abbot Kumu the right way, so much so that he could not help but nod in approval as he thought this was the best thing that this nephew of his ever said. Seeing him nod, Duan Tiande's hope lit up and he continued: "We just kept on arguing until we began to fight, but I wasn't a match for the Taoist. He came chasing after me; I had nowhere else to go, so that's why I came here. Uncle, please help me!" The monk Kumu replied: "I am a monk, I'm not getting involved in this kind of name-seeking matters that you men get yourself into." Duan Tiande begged: "Just this one time, uncle, I will never do anything like this again."

Remembering his brother of yesteryear and quite angry at the Taoist for saying what he said, the Venerable Kumu finally relented: "Alright, you can hide here for a couple of days. I don't want any kind of trouble from you." Duan Tiande agreed to everything and anything he demanded. Abbot Kumu sighed: "An honorable army officer, pah... utterly useless! If the Jin army really does invade, then what will we do? Ay! Back then, I..." Frightened by threats from Duan Tiande, Li Ping just stood there by his side through all his lies, not daring to say a single word.

The next afternoon, the guest attending monk [Zhike Seng] ran in and reported to monk Kumu: "There's a Taoist priest out front, shouting all kinds of stuff and creating havoc, saying something about making Duan.... Commander Duan, come outside."

Abbot Kumu went and got Duan Tiande and told him. In a panic, Duan Tiande said: "It's him, it's him!" Abbot Kumu

asked: "Which sect does this vicious Taoist belong to?" Duan Tiande replied: "I don't know which hole that barbarian crawled out of, but his martial arts don't seem that great, it's just that his arm strength is enormous. The only reason I lost is because I didn't know any martial arts at all." Abbot Kumu replied: "Alright, I'm going to go meet him in person." Walking out to the Main Hall, he ran right into Qiu Chuji who was trying to break into the temple. The guard monks were trying their best to slow him down, but they were failing. The Abbot Kumu walked up to him and gently pushed Qiu Chuji's shoulder, using a bit of inner strength; he figured he would just push Qiu Chuji out of the Main Hall. But, to his surprise, it felt as if he was pushing down on a pile of cotton, there was nothing there that he could actually push against. Knowing he was in trouble, he immediately tried to pull back. But it was too late as he stumbled back out of control and backed into the offerings table. "Crack!" "Boom!" Half of the offerings table collapsed and all the offerings on it were scattered and fell onto the floor.

Shocked, a thought ran through his mind: "This Taoist's martial arts are truly amazing, much more than just enormous arm strength, undoubtedly." He immediately held his palm up and saluted: "May I ask why the reverend has come to visit our humble monastery?" Qiu Chuji replied: "I'm looking for an evil criminal with the surname of Duan." Knowing that he himself was no match for Qiu Chuji, Kumu replied: "We men of religion should always be merciful and forgiving, why is the Priest stooping to the same level as laymen?"

Ignoring him, Qiu Chuji walked into the Inner Hall. By now Duan Tiande had already hidden himself and Li Ping. Yunlou Temple's incense was very popular and it was the Spring Pilgrimage season, so the hall was filled with believers of

both genders. Realizing that it was impossible to search thoroughly, Qiu Chuji snorted and walked out.

When Duan Tiande came out from his hiding place, monk Kumu demanded angrily: "Barbarian? If he wasn't holding back, I would be dead by now!" Duan Tiande replied: "That barbaric Taoist is a spy for the Jin; why else would he make a point of specifically troubling us officers of the Great Song?" The Zhike Seng came back in and reported that the Taoist had left. Monk Kumu asked: "Did he say anything as he left?" The Zhike Seng replied: "He said that he would never give up until we turn over that... that officer named Duan."

The Kumu shot an angry look at Duan Tiande and said: "Judging from what you said, I can't figure out why you are hiding. This Taoist's martial arts are really too strong. You probably won't come out alive if you fall into his hands." After quietly thinking for a while, he continued: "You can't stay here any longer. My younger martial brother monk Jiaomu's martial arts are better than mine. He's the only one who has a chance of stopping that Taoist; why don't you go and hide with him for a while?" Duan Tiande didn't even dare to utter a single word fearing that he might anger his uncle. Later his uncle handed him a letter to give to the monk Jiaomu explaining the situation. He immediately rented a boat and headed for Jiaxingg in the middle of the night.

How could the monk Jiaomu have guessed that the person he dragged in with him was actually a woman? Since he had the letter from his elder martial brother, he naturally allowed Duan Tiande to stay. When Qiu Chuji found out about this, he came pursuing as well. He even spotted Li Ping in the back gardens of the temple. But by the time he'd burst into the temple, Duan Tiande had already dragged Li Ping into the underground storage room with him. Qiu

Chuji, still thinking that Li Ping was in the temple, demanded that she be handed over. Since he saw her with his own eyes, he did not believe any answers that the monk Jiaomu came up with, and their argument got worse and worse. As soon as Qiu Chuji revealed a bit of his martial arts, the monk Jiaomu knew absolutely he was no match. Having always been a good friend of the Seven Freaks, he set up a meeting with Qiu Chuji in the Pavilion of the Drunken Immortal. That huge vat that Qiu Chuji had with him came from that very Fahua Monastery. When he ran into the Jin soldiers in the Pavilion of the Drunken Immortal, Qiu Chuji's misunderstanding got even worse.

The monk Jiaomu really did not know much about the truth of the matter. On the way back to the Fahua Monastery from the Pavilion of the Drunken Immortal, he told the Seven Freaks about the two men that his martial brother Abbot Kumu sent to him. He added at the end: "I have heard that all of the Seven Masters of Quanzhen Sect are masters of martial arts, each receiving the direct teachings of Master Chongyang. Among them, elder Changchun Zi was known as the best, and it turns out that he's as good as they say. Even though he's rather rude, he doesn't seem to be the kind who doesn't care for reason, and there aren't any enmities between the two of us. There must be some great misunderstanding at work here."

Quan Jinfa suggested: "I think the best thing to do is to bring out the two men that your martial brother sent to you so we can sort this out." Monk Jiaomu acknowledged, "Good point, I haven't really interrogated them very well yet." He was just about to send some people to go get Duan Tiande when Ke Zhen'E spoke up: "That priest Qiu Chuji's temper is really something, quite explosive. He obviously does not consider us people in the martial world south of the Yangtze as worthy of respect. His Quanzhen Sect may be able to act

like bosses up north, but we can't allow them to act like bosses when they come down south like this. If we can't clear up the misunderstanding, then we have to sort this out with martial arts. If we go up against him one-on-one, none of us are a match for him. But he didn't come here with good intentions." Zhu Cong added: "Let's gang up on him together!" Han Baoju commented: "Eight against one? Not very heroic don't you think?" Quan Jinfa reasoned: "It's not like we are going to kill him, we are only trying to calm him down so he will listen to the monk Jiaomu's explanation." Han Xiaoying was rather worried: "If it gets out that monk Jiaomu and the Seven Freaks of the South ganged up on someone, wouldn't that tarnish our name?"

The eight of them hadn't worked out what to do yet when a thunderous noise came from the Main Hall of the temple followed by the thundering of metal banging on metal. Qiu Chuji was banging the huge bell that hung from the ceiling of the Main Hall with the bronze vat. After several hits, the vat began to crack. The look on his face was furious. The Seven Freaks didn't know that Qiu Chuji wasn't always this rash and unreasonable. He had been so frustrated by his own inability to capture Duan Tiande that he was about to lose control; that, added to his deep-seated hatred of the Jin, led to his behaving this way. The Seven Freaks all thought that he was trying to bully them with his reputation, so they decided to fight it out. The more famous the Seven Masters of Quanzhen were, the more determined the Seven Freaks were not to back down and appear to be bullied. If Qiu Chuji had been some unknown martial arts practitioner, this situation would have, ironically, been much easier to resolve and probably already would have been.

Han Baoju shouted: "Sister, let's take the lead." He was Han Xiaoying's first cousin on her father's side and, of the seven, had the least amount of patience. In one motion, the

'Golden Dragon' whip that was around his waist was now in his hands and he swept a "Wind Swirling the Crippled Cloud" causing the whip to snap toward Qiu Chuji's right hand which was holding up the vat. Han Xiaoying unsheathed her sword as well and thrust toward the center of Qiu Chuji's back. Attacked from both fronts, Qiu Chuji rotated his wrist, causing the whip to hit the vat instead. Then he turned his body slightly sideways and let the sword pass by his side.

In the last years of the Spring and Autumn era, the states Yue and Wu were mortal enemies. The King of the state of Yue, Gou Qian, in order to remind himself of the shame of defeat and to motivate himself to excel, tortured himself by sleeping on a straw bed and tasting everyday a gall-bladder that he hung from the ceiling. Nevertheless, the King of Wu had a general under him named Wu Tzushi who, being a disciple of Sun-Tze's school of war, was a great tactician and trainer. Seeing that his army was still no match for his enemy's, Gou Qian got more and more depressed. One day, a beautiful young girl with amazing sword skills suddenly appeared inside the Yue borders. Happy beyond words, Gou Qian immediately asked her to teach his soldiers her skills and was finally able to defeat the Wu army because of it. Jiaxing, being the meeting place between the two states, was a place where several battles occurred. It was no surprise that the entire sword technique was passed down in this area. The only problem was that the sword skill was designed to be most effective on the battlefield. It was mostly used to chop down numerous soldiers and bringing down horses in a crowd. It was not nimble or agile enough when used against martial arts practitioners in the martial world. It was only in the last days of the Tang dynasty that this sword technique received a much needed upgrade from a swordplay genius from this area. This sword master made the moves much more complex and speedier.

Although Han Xiaoying hadn't yet mastered the entire repertoire that she learned from her master, she was still very deadly. Her nickname "Yue Sword Maiden" was a reference to this. [Note: The entire story regarding this sword technique is covered in another Jin Yong short story, Sword of the Yue Maiden, or Yue Nu Jian.]

After only a few moves, Qiu Chuji had figured out her repertoire and decided to beat its speed with even more speed. She was fast, Qiu Chuji was even faster. Using his right arm to block Han Baoju's whip, his left hand came shooting out in an attempt to snatch the sword out of her hand by sheer force. In an instant, Han Xiaoying was forced to retreat to the side of the temple's statue of Buddha.

Nan Xiren and Zhang Ahsheng charged in and attacked from both sides. Nan Xiren was just as quiet as can be and let his carrying stick make all the sounds. But Zhang Ahsheng was completely opposite, shouting and screaming all kinds of street talk and all in his south Yangtze accent. Qiu Chuji didn't understand any of it, so he just pretended he didn't hear it.

In the flurry of the fight Qiu Chuji's left palm suddenly came straight out right at Zhang Ahsheng's face. Instinctively, Zhang Ahsheng bent himself over backwards to avoid it, but the move turned out to be a decoy. Qiu Chuji's right foot came flying out hitting Zhang Ahsheng's right wrist, knocking his knife loose. But Zhang Ahsheng is much better with nothing in his hands, so he did not miss a beat as he balanced himself with his left leg, faked with a right hand, and attacked with his left fist.

Qiu Chuji let out a shout of approval before dodging out of the way and uttering: "Pity, pity!" Zhang Ahsheng had to ask: "What?" Qiu Chuji replied: "Pity that you, such a martial arts expert, would bring on shame to yourself by

befriending evil monks and serving the Jin." Made furious by that accusation, Zhang Ahsheng shouted back: "Bastard Taoist, you are the one that's serving the Jin!" He took three swings at Qiu Chuji in quick succession during that exchange. Qiu Chuji dodged out of the way and tilted the vat, causing two of Zhang Ahsheng's punches to actually land on the vat.

Seeing that they were still losing despite of their four to one advantage, Zhu Cong made a gesture towards Quan Jinfu and the two of them charged into the scuffle. Quan Jinfu's weapon was a huge hand scale with which he used the scale handle as a bat, the scale hook as a flying hook, and the scale weight as a mace; literally three weapons in one. Zhu Cong, on the other hand, excelled at hitting pressure points. That dirty and broken fan of his was actually made of iron which he used like an extension of his arm. This facilitated hitting pressure points and deflecting other weapons or enemies coming at him. Qiu Chuji spun and tilted the vat in his right hand at will, making it a huge shield that guarded his front side while using his left hand to fight back and attack. With such a huge burden in his hand, he could no longer move around as nimbly as he should, but it was still quite advantageous for him because he could use the vat to block many of the attacks coming towards him.

The monk Jiaomu, seeing the fight quickly getting out of hand, figured that someone could be seriously hurt any moment now. He tried to get everyone's attention by shouting as loud as he could: "Everyone please stop! Please listen to what I have to say!" But who would actually stop in the middle of a fierce fight?

Qiu Chuji shouted back: "Hypocrite! Who wants to hear you talk? Watch this!" Suddenly his left hand turned ferociously towards Zhang Ahsheng as it shifted between fist and palm



over and over again without rhyme or reason. This move, called "Flying Mountain Outside the Heavens," was based on strange form and incredible speed, and was meant to take an opponent by surprise, as it did Zhang Ahsheng. Monk Jiaomu shouted: "No! Reverend! Please don't!" Qiu Chuji had been fighting for so long and against so many able opponents that he was afraid that the fight would last too long. Since there were two men standing on the sidelines waiting to jump in at any moment, he was worried very much about his own life. Now that he had found an opening in his opponent's defense, how could he just let it go? Therefore, he put all his strength and power behind this move.

In his martial arts training he trained his body specifically to strengthen the toughness of his skin. The fact that he liked to wrestle with wild bulls and buffaloes for work and as a hobby, Zhang Ahsheng's body was covered with a layer of thick and hard muscles, which resembled the thick skin of bulls. Even though he knew that this strike packed quite a force, and since he figured that he couldn't get out of the way, he immediately gathered his inner strength and prepared himself for a strike on his shoulder and shouted: "Come on!". Hence, he caught the palm full on. "Crack!" Incredibly, his collar bone, despite of all his preparation, snapped under the pure inner force of the Quanzhen Sect.

Shocked, Zhu Cong attacked aggressively with his iron fan, aiming right at a pressure point on Qiu Chuji. As the saying goes, offense is the best defense; Zhu Cong attacked to protect his sworn brother from further harm now that he was injured. But Qiu Chuji, having just gained the upper hand, immediately began trying to seize some of the weapons that were flying around him. "Ai-Yo!" Quan Jinfa shouted as Qiu Chuji got a hold of his scale. With a jerk, Qiu Chuji pulled him a meter closer. This put him between Qiu

and the two other attackers, Nan Xiren and Zhu Cong. Qiu Chuji's left palm flew toward Quan Jinfa's scalp.

Han Baoju and Han Xiaoying both immediately jumped in and thrust their weapons at Qiu Chuji's head in an attempt to stop him. Qiu Chuji had no choice but to dodge out of the way and let Quan Jinfa escape. Having just escaped death, Quan Jinfa was covered in sweat; nevertheless he took a kick to his side that made him writhe on the ground in pain, unable to get up.

The monk Jiaomu didn't want to actually come to blows. He'd hoped that his misunderstanding with Qiu Chuji would have been peacefully worked out by now. Seeing the friends that had come to his aid were going down one by one, he had to join in the scuffle. He tossed his long sleeve, raised the piece of burnt wood in his hand, and lunged at Qiu Chuji. Qiu Chuji thought: "So it seems that this monk is a master at hitting pressure points." He put up his guard against him.

Ke Zhen'E figured from all the shouting that his sworn brothers and sister were hurt, so he grabbed his iron staff and was about to charge into the fight when Quan Jinfa shouted: "Big Brother, fire your projectiles! First at 'Jin', then go for 'Xiao Guo'!" Before his voice even died down, two projectiles flew directly toward Qiu Chuji's forehead and right hip.

Qiu Chuji was shocked. It's not often that one meets a blind man able to fire projectiles so accurately, even with a person on the side telling him where to fire them. He immediately spun the vat in his hand and knocked the two projectiles down. These projectiles are used only by Ke Zhen'E, and had corners on all 4 sides like a diamond, but as sharp anyone could make them. He learned to use them after he was blinded because the projectiles were heavy,

making it easy for him to be accurate. After knocking the projectiles down with the vat, Qiu Chuji actually felt the vat shake! He thought: "Amazing, what strength!"

By now all the other Freaks had dodged out of the way. Quan Jinfa still kept shouting: "'Zhong Fu', now 'Lie'!.... Good, now the Taoist has moved into ' Ming Yi'...." He had done this with Ke Zhen'E so many times over the years that it almost seemed as if his eyes were Ke Zhen'E's. He was the only one among Freaks that could do this. Ke Zhen'E was firing as if he could see and in an instant he had fired dozens of projectiles. So many that Qiu Chuji was now forced to fend off the projectiles with no opportunity to fight back whatsoever.

Suddenly a thought came to Ke Zhen'E: "He's hearing sixth brother as well, so he's prepared every time, no wonder I can't hit him." Quan Jinfa's voice was getting softer and softer with moans sandwiched in between, obviously in great pain. Ke Zhen'E did not hear Zhang Ahsheng make a single noise at all and nobody was quite sure whether or not he's alive. Quan Jinfa struggled to get out: "Hit... hit... 'Tong Ren'...." But this time Ke Zhen'E did not follow his advice, instead he threw up both arms and fired four projectiles, one each at the "Jie" and "Sun" positions right of "Tong Ren" and the other two heading for the "Feng" and "Lie" position left of "Tong Ren."

Not expecting Ke Zhen'E to suddenly use trickery, Qiu Chuji took a big step left and dodged the "Tong Ren" position as two people suddenly screamed in pain. Qiu Chuji's right shoulder was hit, but the projectile aimed towards the "Sun" position hit Han Xiaoying's back. Surprised and pleased, Ke Zhen'E shouted: "Little sister, come here!"

Knowing that her big brother coated his projectiles with a virulent poison, Han Xiaoying immediately scrambled to his

side. Ke Zhen'E took out a small, yellow colored pill from his bag, stuffed it in her mouth, and instructed: "Go to the yard outside and sleep, do not move, I'll come and attend to you later." Han Xiaoying immediately got up and ran towards the yard. But Ke Zhen'E shouted: "Don't run! Don't run! Walk slowly!" Han Xiaoying immediately understood and cursed at herself for being so stupid. Because her blood will circulate faster when she ran and if the poison was carried into the heart, there would be no way she could be saved. She stopped and slowly walked out.

After being hit, Qiu Chuji just ignored it because it was not very painful and just kept on fighting against the rest of the group. However, in the midst of the fight he suddenly heard Ke Zhen'E shout "Don't run!" several times. A chill went through his heart as he suddenly noticed that his arm around the wound felt very numb. He realized that the projectile had poison on it. Not daring to hesitate, he collected his strength and aimed a punch at Nan Xiren's face as hard as he could.

Noticing that the punch coming his way, Nan Xiren bent his knees, held his iron carrying stick across his chest, and pulled a move called "Iron Chain Across the River" to block the punch. Qiu Chuji did not pull the punch at all. On the contrary, he actually took a deep breath and put even more force into the punch, hitting the stick squarely in the middle. Nan Xiren's body shook violently and he had to drop his stick as the part of his hand between his thumb and index finger split open and blood began rushing out. As it turned out Qiu Chuji wasn't keeping anything in reserve in an attempt to bring the fight to a speedy end so he could save his own life. He pretty much put everything he had into this punch, causing massive internal injuries to Nan Xiren. Feeling weak on his feet, numbness in his mouth as

well as seeing stars, Nan Xiren suddenly fell to the floor throwing up blood.

Although he had taken down another foe, the numbness in Qiu Chuji's shoulder was getting worse and worse, causing him to start having trouble controlling that huge vat in his hand. So with a shout, he swept his left leg, making Han Baoju leave his feet to dodge the attack. "Where do you think you are going?" Qiu Chuji yelled as he pushed the vat off so that it came down on top of Han Baoju. Because he was in midair, Han Baoju could not do a thing other than do a half flip. By then the vat had already covered his head. In an attempt to avoid any serious injuries, he immediately put his hands over his head and curled up into a ball. "Bang!" The vat hit the floor and conveniently and neatly covered up Han Baoju.

As soon as he let go of the vat, Qiu Chuji unsheathed his sword. With a little kick against the ground with his toes, he jumped up and cut the rope that held the huge bell to the ceiling. At the same time, he gave the bell a little push to aim the bell directly at the vat, making it come down right on top of the vat. Now Han Baoju was truly stuck. However, Qiu Chuji had really expended a huge amount of energy with these last two moves and as a result, all of his extremities were beginning to feel numb and huge drops of perspiration were beginning to bead on his forehead.

Ke Zhen'E shouted: "Drop your weapons and stop now! If you wait any longer, your life could be in danger!" But Qiu Chuji figured that since the monk was in league with both the Jin and the Song soldiers and hid women in his temple, then his friends, the Freaks, could not be anything better. He would rather die than to submit to these bastards. So he turned around and began to try and fight his way out.

With only Ke Zhen'E and Zhu Cong still unharmed and the condition of the others still unknown how could either one of them let him get away? So Ke Zhen'E held up his iron staff and stood in front of the door, blocking his way out. Desperate to get out any way he could, Qiu Chuji stuck his sword out right at Ke Zhen'E's face. Ke Zhen'E's nickname 'Flying Bat Soaring through the Sky' came about for a reason, so he easily heard what was going on and parried the sword with his staff, almost knocking the sword out of Qiu Chuji's hand. Shocked, Qiu Chuji said to himself: "How strong is this blind man's inner strength? Could it possibly be stronger than mine?" He immediately followed with another thrust, which was parried again. But Qiu Chuji had found out that it wasn't because Ke Zhen'E's inner strength was stronger, it was because his right arm was wounded and therefore he could not exert his full force through it. He switched the sword over to his left hand and began using a skill that he'd never used in combat before, 'Swordsmanship of Common Demise'. The sword flashed as one move after another came flying towards the vitals of Ke Zhen'E, Zhu Cong, and the monk Jiaomu; he wasn't defending at all, every single one of his moves was an attack.

The name 'Swordsmanship of Common Demise' was designed for a person to fight for his life against a much more powerful opponent. Every move is designed to attack the enemy in a vital spot with incredible force and without the slightest care for one's own life. Although this is a highly refined sword skill, it's actually very similar to those scraps between ruffians and the lowlifes of the streets. As it turns out the Quanzhen Sect has a nemesis that resides in the western regions. This man was much more powerful than any of the Seven Masters of Quanzhen, and he was as ruthless as he was powerful. At one time only the disciples' master could subdue and control this man, but now that the

master had passed away, there was a chance that this man could come back to the central plains at any time and destroy the entire Quanzhen Sect. The Seven Masters of Quanzhen do have a "Big Dipper Formation" that could contain this man; however, this formation only works with all seven disciples present. There was the possibility that they might run into this man without every one being present. This 'Swordsmanship of Common Demise' was meant to be used against this man, especially in single combat, in the hopes that the two combatants would both perish and thus preserve the sect. Poisoned and surrounded by three martial arts masters, Qiu Chuji had no choice but to use this skill.

After about a dozen exchanges or so, Ke Zhen'E's leg was hit. Monk Jiaomu shouted: "Big Brother Ke, Brother Zhu, why don't we just let him go on his way?" But because of this little distraction, his right rib was hit, causing him to fall to the ground screaming.

By now, Qiu Chuji was having trouble keeping his balance as well. His eyes were bloodshot; Zhu Chong exchanged several more moves with him, all the while cursing at him nonstop. Ke Zhen'E, not being able to see, was completely baffled by the sound created by Qiu Chuji's sword and was hit again, this time on his right leg, and he fell to the ground.

Zhu Cong cursed: "Dog of a Taoist, bastard Taoist! The poison in your veins has reached your heart by now! Why don't you try and make three more moves with me?"

Furious, Qiu Chuji simply came charging at him, but Zhu Cong's lightness martial arts were very good and he flew around the hall. Knowing that he could not keep this up any longer, Qiu Chuji stopped and sighed. Suddenly every thing turned dark in front of him. He tried to shake his mind clear

and was just about to look for a way out when suddenly something smacked his back. It was a shoe that Zhu Cong had taken off.

Even though the shoe was soft, it still carried quite a bit of force with it because of Zhu Cong's inner strength. Qiu Chuji teetered as he fought hard to maintain consciousness. Suddenly something else hit the back of his head. This time it was a wooden fish [muyu] that Zhu Cong had found laying in front the Buddha statue. [Note: the wooden fish (muyu) is a wooden percussion instrument that Buddhist priests use to keep rhythm while chanting.]

Fortunately, Qiu Chuji's inner strength was very strong; a normal person would have undoubtedly died from that hit, but he did almost black out from it. Qiu Chuji yelled at the top of his lungs: "Forget it, forget it! 'Changchun Zi' Qiu Chuji shall die today at the hands of these shameless bastards!" Feeling his knees suddenly give away, he collapsed onto the floor.

Fearing that he might jump back up again, Zhu Cong reached down to hit the pressure point in the middle of Qiu Chuji's chest when he suddenly saw Qiu Chuji's left hand move. Knowing that he was in trouble, Zhu Cong immediately tried to bring his right arm back in front of his chest to block the blow. But a huge force came up from below his belly and shot him away. He was spitting out blood even before he landed. Even though he could not move, Qiu Chuji had put all the strength left in him into this strike. There was no way in the world that Zhu Cong could take such a force.

None of the other monks in the temple knew any martial arts; in fact, none of them even knew that their master knew martial arts. The sudden chaos in the main hall had sent them fleeing for their lives a long time ago. Only after



things had quieted down for quite a while did a couple of the braver monks stick their heads out to see what had happened. What they saw was, blood everywhere, bodies everywhere; this sent them screaming and scrambling to Duan Tiande.

Duan Tiande had been hiding in the underground storage room the entire time and was ecstatic on hearing the news that both sides were completely destroyed in the fight. Making sure that Qiu Chuji was among those fighting, he told the monks to go and check whether or not the Taoist had died. Only after the monks came back with the news that the Taoist was lying on the floor with his eyes shut did he finally feel safe and dragged Li Ping to the main hall.

He gave Qiu Chuji a kick, causing Qiu Chuji to let out an almost imperceptible moan. Duan Tiande pulled out his saber and shouted: "Do you have any idea how much suffering you have caused me you Taoist bastard? Well now your foe is going to send you on your way to the Western Paradise!"

Even though he was greatly injured, monk Jiaomu summoned all his strength and shouted: "Don't... don't harm him!" Duan Tiande asked: "Why not?" Monk Jiaomu, still recovering from the shout, got out between breaths: "He's a good man... just a little im... impatient, so there was some misunderstand...." Duan Tiande replied: "A good man? Who cares? Let me kill him!" The monk Jiaomu angrily rebuked: "Are you going to listen to me or not? Put... put down your saber!" Duan Tiande laughed heartily at that remark and shouted back: "Put down my saber? Then what? Become enlightened on the spot?" He lifted up his saber and began to swing it down at Qiu Chuji. [Note: Duan Tiande's becoming enlightened remark is a reference to a Buddhist saying that one could put down his weapon and become enlightened on the spot.]

Furious, the monk Jiaomu summoned up all his strength again and tossed the piece of burnt wood in his hand at Duan Tiande as hard as he could. Duan Tiande tried to dodge out of the way, but his martial arts were just not good enough and it caught him on the side of his mouth and knocked out three of his teeth. In pain and humiliated, Duan Tiande, ignoring the fact that he owed his life to the monk Jiaomu, lifted his saber and tried to chop off the monk's head. However, a small monk who was right beside him grabbed onto his right arm and held on for his life while another one grabbed his collar. In fury, Duan Tiande swung his saber back and brought it down upon those two monks. Even though Qiu Chuji, Jiaomu, and Freaks were all martial arts masters, every single one of them was gravely injured or kept from the battle and could not do a thing to stop him.

Li Ping screamed: "Bastard! Stop! Stop!" She had been dragged all over the place by Duan Tiande and had been patiently waiting for an opportunity to present itself to her to avenge her husband. Seeing the ground covered in blood and this man about to commit more murders, she could not hold back any longer. She charged up to him and began to fight him for all she's worth. The others had thought she was just an underling of Duan Tiande because of her uniform. Everyone was quite surprised when she suddenly attacked Duan Tiande.

Being blind, Ke Zhen'E's hearing was especially sensitive and knew that she was female as soon as he heard her. He turned to Jiaomu: "Monk Jiaomu, we are all going to die because of you. You really did have a girl hidden in your temple!"

After a moment of surprise, the monk Jiaomu understood what had happened. He thought that because of one slight oversight on his part, he had not only got himself hurt, he

had taken his friends down with him as well. In anger and humiliation, he punched the ground with both hands to help him stand up and charged at Duan Tiande with all his might. Seeing him coming with such ferociousness, Duan Tiande immediately dodged out of the way in fear. Not being able to control his own body because of the injury, the monk Jiaomu ran straight into one of the temple's columns head first and died on the spot.

Frightened out of his wits, Duan Tiande grabbed Li Ping and ran off as fast as he could. Li Ping's shouts for help got further and further away.

## Chapter 3 - The Winds of the Steppes

Translated by Minglei Huang



*Jochi was furious; lifting his horsewhip he struck again. Guo Jing rolled around on the ground and when he rolled close to Jochi, he suddenly jumped up and grabbed his right leg very tightly. Jochi*

*exerted his strength to shake him off, but the boy's grip was surprisingly strong and he couldn't get him off.*

The monks were crying because of the venerable monk Jiaomu's death but some of them were still able to take care of the wounded by bandaging up their wounds and carrying them into the guest rooms. Suddenly there came an incessant banging from the vat underneath the huge bell. Not knowing what kind of monster was present, the monks looked at each other with blank faces. Not knowing what to do started to chant the 'Sutra of the High King' [Gao Wang Jing]. But the banging continued through all the chants of 'Help the Sufferers' and 'Amida Buddha'. Finally, a dozen or so of the more courageous monks pulled the huge bell back up again with a huge thick rope. As soon as they lifted the vat, a huge ball of meat came rolling out from underneath it. Scared beyond words, the monks scattered. That ball of meat suddenly stood up, it turned out to be Han Baoju. Being covered for the last half of the fight, he had no idea what had happened. Looking around, he noticed monk Jiaomu had died and all his sworn brothers were greatly injured and almost panicked. He walked over to Qiu Chuji and was about to strike down at his head with his 'Golden Dragon Whip'.

"Third Brother, NO!" Quan Jinfa shouted.

"Why not?" Han Baoju demanded in anger.

"You... just can't," was all Quan Jinfa could get out because of the pain in his abdomen.

Even though both of his legs were wounded, Ke Zhen'E's mind was still working fine. He took out the antidote for his poison and instructed the monks to give the right amounts

to both Qiu Chuji and Han Xiaoying, all the while explaining what had happened to Han Baoju. Enraged, Han Baoju was about to go chasing after Duan Tiande when Ke Zhen'E shouted: "We'll find that bastard sooner or later. First help those of your brothers who suffered internal injuries."

Both Zhu Cong and Nan Xiren had suffered severe internal injuries and that kick to Quan Jinfa's stomach was quite a blow too. Zhang Ahsheng's collar bone was broken and his chest was hit as well, knocking him out temporarily. Once he woke up, it turned out he wasn't in any mortal danger. He immediately began helping others in the temple.

The monks of the Fahua Monastery [Temple of Oriental Zen] sent a couple of errand runners to report the events to Abbot Kumu at the Yunlou Monastery [Cloudy Pavilion Temple] and also began to make funeral arrangements for the monk Jiaomu.

After several days, the poison in Qiu Chuji and Han Xiaoying's body was eradicated. Being the medical expert that he was, Qiu Chuji immediately began combining herbs and treating Zhu Cong and others as well as massaging and snapping bones back into place. Luckily, everyone's kung fu base was strong enough so that the internal as well as the external injuries were not serious. After several more days, everyone was able to sit up again. One day, all eight of them gathered in one of the monk's rooms and reflected on how they were manipulated into fighting each other, resulting in the death of the monk Jiaomu and injuries to all parties. All of them were silent, not knowing what to say.

After a while, Han Xiaoying finally broke the silence: "Everyone knows about Priest Qiu's intelligence and wit, and the seven of us didn't exactly begin wandering the world yesterday. Yet we were all manipulated into this by some little nobody. If this ever gets out, everyone in the

martial world will laugh at us. Reverend, do you have any idea as to how to clean up this mess?"

Qiu Chuji had been blaming himself for the last couple of days, thinking that if only he had sat down and calmly talked with the monk Jiaomu then all of this could have been avoided. So, in deference, he turned to Ke Zhen'E: "Big Brother Ke, what do you say?"

Ke Zhen'E's temper was bad to begin with; after his eyes were blinded it got even worse. The fact that Qiu Chuji himself brought down all seven of them combined was, in fact, what he considered to be one of the biggest embarrassments of his life. Coupled with the fact that the pain in his legs from the sword wound was still throbbing, he was barely able to hold back his indignation. He sneered and replied: "Priest Qiu uses his sword skills to take down anyone in his way and never needs to respect anyone. Why consult us over this matter?"

Qiu Chuji was taken aback for a moment, but immediately realized that he was still angry about the matter. He stood up, cupped his fist, and bowed to the Seven Freaks. "I was wrong in my actions; I was too rude and headstrong. This entire matter is entirely my fault and I ask you all for your forgiveness."

Zhu Cong and the rest of the Freaks returned the gesture. Ke Zhen'E pretended not to notice and coldly replied: "I say the seven of us have lost all of our rights to meddle in the affairs of the martial world. We should settle down here, fishing, chopping wood, or whatever. As long as Priest Qiu does not come around again, we would at least be able to spend the rest of our lives in peace."

Qiu Chuji blushed a little from that verbal slash. After a brief pause, he suddenly stood up and said: "Since I was at

fault this time, I will never dare step into this area again. As for retribution for monk Jiaomu's death, it will all fall on my shoulders and I will kill that bastard with my own hands and avenge him. Having said all that I need to say, it's now time for me to leave." Qiu Chuji bowed towards everyone again and began to walk out.

"Stop!" Ke Zhen'E shouted.

Qiu Chuji turned around and said, "Does Big Brother Ke have something else to say?"

"You have injured all of us," Ke Zhen'E replied, "and you expect all of this to just disappear because you said a couple of words?"

"Then what does Big Brother Ke want? As long as it is within my abilities I will try my best to do it."

"We just can't let this slide right now," Ke Zhen'E answered, "so it would be nice if Reverend gives us something more."

Although the Seven Freaks were all very righteous and moral individuals; they were also very proud and acted very strangely, making them well deserving the title of "Seven Freaks". Each is a master of kung fu and they always worked together, so they had never come out on the short end of a struggle when going up against others in the martial world. Several years ago they got into a fight with the Huaiyang Clan; the seven of them killed over one hundred or so of the Huaiyang Clan members on the shores of the Yangtze. Back then Han Xiaoying was still a child, but she still managed to kill two foes. The name 'Seven Freaks of the South' became famous throughout the martial world. Defeat by the hands of Qiu Chuji did not go down very well with any of them. Add that to the fact that the monk Jiaomu, a good friend of the Freaks, died, one could argue, because of Qiu Chuji's rashness. But there was still the fact that a



woman WAS hidden inside the temple and she WAS the widow of Guo Xiaotian, as Qiu Chuji had claimed. This made the Freaks partly to blame; however, at this moment, the Freaks had forgotten about that.

"I was hit by your projectile," Qiu Chuji replied. "And if it wasn't for Big Brother Ke's antidote, I would have been dead a long time ago. So for this fight, I wholeheartedly admit defeat."

"If that's the case," Ke Zhen'E replied, "then leave that sword that you carry on your back and you can go." He knew that if the two sides fought again at this time only the Han siblings would be able to put up a fight and that victory for his side was impossible. But all of the Freaks would rather die than to let the matter pass like this.

This angered Qiu Chuji greatly: "I have already given you people a lot of face and that should be enough. I also admitted defeat, what else do you want? The sword is for my protection," he continued, "just like that staff Big Brother Ke carries around."

"Are you poking fun at my blindness?" Ke Zhen'E shouted back.

"I dare not!"

"We are all injured right now, so it's hard to actually fight at this moment." Ke Zhen'E shouted angrily. "So I invite priest Qiu to come and duel with the seven of us a year from today at the Pavilion of the Drunken Immortal."

Qiu Chuji frowned at that remark. He thought, "Because the Seven Freaks weren't bad people, there was really no point in keeping this grudge going between us. The day after the Venerable Jiaomu died, Han Baoju could have killed me easily once he got out from underneath the bell."

Besides, this whole matter was caused more or less by my own rashness. A real man knows what's right and wrong. If he's wrong then he should admit it. To sort all this out with the Freaks won't be easy either." After thinking silently for a bit, an idea suddenly came to him, "If you really want to determine who is better between us, then we could do that," he said. "But only according to the rules I lay down. Otherwise, I have already lost to Hero Zhu at the Pavilion of the Drunken Immortal, and I lost again fighting here in the temple. I have already lost twice and would inevitably lose the third time as well, there's no point in going any further."

Han Baoju, Han Xiaoying, and Zhang Ahsheng immediately stood up, the other four could not stand but all sat up as much as they could. They answered in unison: "When the Seven Freaks of the South duel with someone, we always let our opponent choose the time, place, and method."

Seeing how competitive they were, Qiu Chuji smiled: "So I decide how we should fight no matter what?"

Figuring that no matter what dirty trick Qiu Chuji would come up with, it wouldn't necessarily mean defeat for them, Zhu Cong and Quan Jinfa answered simultaneously: "That's right!"

"A man's word..." Qiu Chuji replied.

"... wild horses can't bring back!" Han Xiaoying finished, but Ke Zhen'E remained silent.

[The saying "A man's word can't be brought back by wild horses" is a famous saying in China about keeping one's word. When a person says it, it means that he will not go back on his word.]

"If you people feel that my way is unfair in any way," Qiu Chuji continued, "then I will admit defeat right here and

now." Obviously planning to gain ground by giving up a little, he knew that the Freaks would never let him admit defeat that easily because of their competitiveness.

"There's no need to play all these word games to anger us, just tell us what it is," Ke Zhen'E replied, as expected.

Qiu Chuji sat down and began to explain: "The method I have in my mind might be a little bit dragged out, but what it really measures is abilities and skills and is susceptible to some temporary mishaps or conditions. Everyone knows any martial artist can fight with blades and fists. We all have names in the martial world and absolutely cannot stoop down to the level of lowly underlings."

"What's left to fight with if we can't do it with blades or fists? Are we having a drinking contest again?" All of the Freaks wondered at that comment.

"This huge contest between us, you seven against me, will not only measure our kung fu skills, but also our will, determination, and wit. With this contest, we will see once and for all who the real hero is."

This entire conversation had all of the Seven Freaks shaking in anticipation and excitement. "Stop stalling, tell us!" Han Xiaoying demanded. "The harder it is the better!"

"If we are competing meditating, making medicine, fortunetelling, or ghost-banishing, then we are no match for priest Qiu at all." Zhu Cong said with a smile.

"And I don't really want to compete with Second Brother Zhu in stealing chickens or taking sheep." Qiu Chuji replied with a smile.

This caused a little bit of laughter from Han Xiaoying, who quickly went back to urging Qiu Chuji on: "Come on, say it!"

"At the very bottom of all of this and the misunderstanding that led to our fight, was saving the descendants of a couple of good men. This matter would be best ended in that way as well." Qiu Chuji went on to tell how he met with Guo Xiaotian and Yang Tiexin all the way to how he pursued Duan Tiande to this temple. Throughout his entire explanation, the Freaks could not stop cursing the Jin as well as the Song government for its corruption.

After he finished the story, Qiu Chuji went on: "That woman that Duan Tiande dragged away was Guo Xiaotian's widow, Madam Li. Other than Big Brother Ke and the Han siblings, I'm sure the other four of you saw them."

"I remember her voice," Ke Zhen'E interrupted, "I will never forget that voice!"

"Great." Qiu Chuji continued, "As for Yang Tiexin's widow, Mrs. Bao, there is no clue as to where she might be. I have seen her before, but you people haven't. So what I propose we do is...."

"... the seven of us would go rescue Mrs. Li while you go save Mrs. Bao and that whoever succeeds wins. Right?" Han Xiaoying eagerly cut in.

Qiu Chuji smiled and replied: "Saving people, while definitely not easy, can't really be used to determine who's a hero and who's not. What I have in mind is much harder and more troublesome."

"So what are you suggesting?" Ke Zhen'E demanded.

"Both of the women are pregnant," Qiu Chuji explained. "After we save them, we must make sure they settle down nicely and allow them to give birth. After that I will teach the Yang child while the seven of you teach the Guo child...."

The Seven Freaks were getting more and more amazed with every word that he said. They were practically mesmerized when Han Baoju cut in: "Then what?"

"After eighteen years, when the kids are both eighteen, all of us, as well as invited friends from all over the martial realm, shall gather at the Pavilion of the Drunken Immortal once again for a huge feast. Then, when we are all sufficiently full and merry, we'll let the two kids duel to see whether it is my disciple who is better or is the disciple of the Seven Heroes really the best." The Seven Freaks stared at each other, completely speechless.

Qiu Chuji continued: "If the Seven Heroes fight me once more and defeat me, then it could easily be because you outnumber me; not much glory there. But if I pass all my kung fu to one person and you guys pass all of your kung fu to one person, then whichever one wins must mean that their master or masters were better."

Filled with pride, Ke Zhen'E slammed his iron staff onto the floor: "Alright! That's what we'll do!"

"What if that bastard Duan Tiande has already killed Mrs. Li? What then?" Quan Jinfa asked.

"That's just the luck of the draw," Qiu Chuji replied. "The heavens wanted me to win, what more could be said?"

"Alright!" Han Baoju pitched in with his opinion. "Rescuing widows and orphans was the right thing to do to begin with. Even if we weren't competing against you we would do it."

Qiu Chuji gave him a thumbs-up and declared: "Third Brother Han is exactly right. If the Seven Heroes are willing to care for the Guo child to adulthood, then I would like to thank everyone for my late Brother Guo." He bowed to each of them again.

"This idea of yours is rather cunning," Zhu Cong observed. "With those several sentences of yours, we brothers and sisters would have to give up eighteen years of our lives?" Qiu Chuji's face changed color a little and he suddenly let out a loud laugh.

"What's so funny?" Han Xiaoying demanded.

"I have long heard and admired the name of the Seven Freaks of the South," Qiu Chuji replied. "Everyone says that the Seven Heroes are truly righteous heroes who are always there when you need them. But today, I see that the rumors were greatly exaggerated."

This made all of the Freaks furious. Han Baoju slammed his fist down onto the bench that he was sitting on and was about to say something when Qiu Chuji cut him off: "Since ancient times, for real heroes and men, making a friend was for life in every way and giving one's life for a friend would be no big thing if loyalty and friendship called for it. Nobody has ever heard of Jing Ke and Nie Zheng haggling about some small thing. The Yang and Guo family are in need of help right now, how could anyone start haggling about it?" [In popular Chinese lore and most versions of Chinese history, Jing Ke and Nie Zheng were two great friends that had helped the Lord of Qi during the beginning of the Spring and Autumn Period. Their friendship was legendary and, in the view of most Chinese, including Confucius, the epitome of what friendship should be.]

After that little speech, Zhu Cong's face was flushed with embarrassment. He flicked his fan and replied, "The Reverend is right, I realize my mistake now. The seven of us will take on this matter!"

Qiu Chuji stood up and said: "Today is the twenty-fourth of the third month, eighteen years from today at noon, we'll

meet again upstairs in the Pavilion of the Drunken Immortal. There, in front of all of the martial world, we will find out who's the real hero!" With a flick of his sleeve, he walked out of the door.

Han Baoju shouted: "I'm off to look for that Duan Tiande now, if he's crawled into a tortoise hole and disappeared, we are going to have to waste a lot of energy."

He was the only one among the Seven Freaks that wasn't injured, so he charged out of the door, mounted 'Wind Chaser', his yellow horse, and began to go chase after Duan Tiande and Li Ping.

"Third Brother...third Brother!" Zhu Cong shouted. "You don't know what they look like!" But Han Baoju wasn't the patient type and with 'Wind Chaser' well deserving of his name, he was long gone.

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Once he was out of the temple, Duan Tiande ran as fast as his legs would carry him, all the while dragging Li Ping. Only after he was sure that nobody was chasing after him did he finally stop and take a breath. Then he ran to the bank of the nearest river and jumped on the first boat that he saw. Taking out his saber and putting it up against the neck of the fisherman, he ordered the man to start moving the boat. The rivers and canals south of the Yangtze were as dense as a spider web and boats were the everyday mode of transportation; as common as horses and carriages were up North. Hence the saying: "Northerners ride horses, Southerners ride boats." With Duan Tiande looking as vicious as he did, as well as being dressed like an official, how could the fisherman dare disobey? He immediately undocked and guided the boat out of the city.

"What a mess! If I go back to Linan, if nothing else, my uncle will kill me on first sight." Duan Tiande thought to himself. "Probably the best thing would be to head north to get away for a while. Hopefully that bastard of a Taoist and those Seven Freaks have all died from their injuries and then my uncle will get so angry that he passes away. Then I can return and get my position back."

Once he made up his mind, he instructed the fisherman to start heading north. Even though Han Baoju's horse was faster, he was nevertheless searching on land, and thus let the two of them slip through.

Duan Tiande switched boats a couple of more times as well and changed his clothes and forced Li Ping to change hers. After ten days or so, he arrived in Yangzhou and decided to check into an inn. He was hoping to be able to settle down in the city for a while and wait out the storm. By an extraordinary coincidence, he just happened to overhear someone inquiring about his whereabouts. Shocked, he peeped through the little crack in the door and saw an amazingly ugly, short, and fat guy with a beautiful young girl. Both of them had a Jiaxing accent. Guessing that they were some of the Seven Freaks, he immediately grabbed Li Ping and ran out of the back door. Luckily, the Yangzhou native at the front desk did not quite understand their dialect and didn't understand what they were asking about. This made it possible for Duan Tiande to get away and rent another boat. Not daring to stop even for a second, he made his way north, up the Grand Canal, all the way to the shore of Ligu Post on the shores of Mount Wei Lake inside the borders of Shangdong province.

Li Ping, who was quite plain looking and whose stomach was bulging by now, was spending days on end cursing and crying. So even though Duan Tiande was by no means a gentleman, he never had any inclinations towards her. All



the two ever did was fight and curse at each other; there wasn't a moment of peace between them.

After several more days, that ugly dwarf and pretty girl showed up again. Duan Tiande had hoped to hide in the back of their accommodations. Li Ping, knowing that her rescuers were near, began to shout at the top of her lungs. Duan Tiande immediately stuffed a wad of cotton into her mouth and beat her. Li Ping struggled and shouted for all she was worth. Even though she wasn't successful in her attempt to get their attention, it was too much of a close call for Duan Tiande.

At first, Duan Tiande brought Li Ping along hoping to use her as a hostage and thereby help him get out of a jam should it ever come to that. But the situation had changed. Figuring that it would be much easier if he was by himself and that this feisty woman was a disaster waiting to happen, he decided that it would be best to kill her. Once the Han cousins had left, he took out his saber.

Li Ping had been waiting the entire time for an opportunity to avenge her husband's death. However, she was tied up every night, making it impossible. Now, upon seeing the murderous look in his eyes, she prayed: "Xiao Ge, please protect me and allow me to kill his monster. Then I will join you." She reached into her shirt and placed her hands on the dagger that Qiu Chuji gave her. She had hidden the dagger very well and was able to slip it past Duan Tiande's search. [Note: Xiao Ge is an affectionate term used by Li Ping with Guo Xiaotian.]

With a chuckle, Duan Tiande raised his saber and swung down at her. Prepared to die, Li Ping summoned all her strength, pointed the dagger at Duan Tiande, and charged. Feeling a burst of murderous cold air upon his face, Duan Tiande flicked his saber in an attempt to knock the dagger

out of her hand. Unexpectedly, the dagger was so sharp that, with a loud ping, it sliced the saber in half. The saber fell onto the floor as the tip of the dagger touched Duan Tiande's chest. Shocked, Duan Tiande instinctively jumped back. Nevertheless, the front of his shirt was slashed wide open. In complete shock and panic, he picked up the chair at his side and shouted: "Put that down this instant or else I'll kill you!" Li Ping was exhausted and the baby in her belly was kicking non-stop. Not able to fight any longer, she fell onto the floor and tried to catch her breath. But she was still clutching the dagger tightly.

Duan Tiande was afraid that Han Baoju would come around again. If he ran off by himself, he was afraid that Li Ping would reveal where he was going to those chasing him. So he immediately forced her onto another boat and went further north up the Grand Canal, passing Linqing, Dezhou, and arrived in Hebei province.

Every time he set up camp, no matter how remote the location, before long there would be several men arriving to look for him. Eventually, the ugly gnome and the girl were joined by a staff wielding blind man. Luckily, none of them recognized him, so he was able to escape every time.

Soon another troublesome thing happened; Li Ping suddenly began acting crazy. Every time they stopped somewhere, she would periodically begin shouting and screaming nonsense. Sometimes, she would even start to tear and rip at her clothes and make all kinds of weird faces and gestures. At first Duan Tiande thought that she really had gone crazy, but after a few days he suddenly figured it out. As it turned out, she was afraid that her pursuers had lost them and was purposefully leaving a trail for them to follow. This was what was making it even harder for him to lose them. By now the end of summer had passed and the cool breezes began to blow. In order to avoid capture, Duan

Tiande went well up into the North Country. The money he had taken with him was about to run out, yet the Freaks were still close on his trail.

"Back in Hangzhou, I was important, I was somebody. Meat, wine, money, women, I had it all. But I had to get greedy and go to Ox Village and kill this bitch's hubby and get myself into this mess." He cursed himself.

Several times, he was on the verge of leaving Li Ping and running off by himself. But each time, he could not summon up enough courage to do it. Every attempt to kill her ended in failure as well. What was supposed to be protection had somehow turned into a curse that he just could not get rid of. On top of everything else, he had to be constantly on guard against her attempts to avenge her husband. He was frustrated, frightened, and angry; yet there was nothing he could do.

Before he realized it, he had arrived at the capital of the Jin Empire, Yanjing. Duan Tiande thought for a bit and decided to try and find an out of the way place and finish off Li Ping. In such a huge and bustling city, there was no way those who were chasing him could find him.

Happy that things were finally going to work out, he made his way towards the city. Unexpectedly, just as he arrived in the front of the gate to the city, a team of Jin soldiers came walking out from inside. Not even bothering to ask any questions, they seized both him and Li Ping, handed them each a carrying stick, and commanded them to carry cargo for them. Because Li Ping was short and a woman, her load was reasonably light. But Duan Tiande was given two 50 kilogram [110 lb] loads and they were practically forcing him to his knees.

This group of soldiers followed an official as they headed north. As it turned out, that particular official was an emissary who was being sent out to present Royal Warrants from the Jin Emperor to the Mongolian subjects of the Jin Empire. The Jin soldiers that accompanied him were seizing any random Han Chinese that they ran into, forcing them to carry their heavy cargo and food supplies so as to save themselves from the labor. Duan Tiande argued back a couple of times and was immediately answered by several stinging lashes to his head. This situation he had seen many times before so it was all quite familiar to him; but before, he had been the one that was doing the whipping, not receiving it.

By now, Li Ping's belly was huge and doing all this heavy work was on the verge of killing her. However, so determined was she to get revenge that she tried her best not to let the Jin soldiers find out about her condition. Fortunately, she had been working on a farm ever since she was able to walk, and this made her strong and used to this kind of grinding work. Having basically resigned herself to death, she was barely able to manage the dozen of days they spent walking through the freezing and miserable steppe.

Even though it was only October, being as far North as they were, a blizzard hit one day that not only brought snow, but also a sandstorm. Having nowhere to hide from the sand and the snow, the entire group, all three hundred or so of them, lined up single-file and continued to make their way through the endless grasslands of the steppe. Suddenly, faint shouting could be heard approaching from the north. Through the sand filled air, an army of countless horsemen came charging at them.

Before any of them realized what was going on, the army had arrived. As it turned out they were an army from some

unknown tribe from the north that had just lost a battle. Chaos descended on the group as everyone tossed their weapons away and began running for their lives. Some of those who did not have horses were quickly trampled by those who had.

The Jin soldiers, seeing that defeat was inevitable, immediately scattered. Li Ping was originally at Duan Tiande's side, but lost him during the chaos of the attack. She threw off her share of the cargo and ran as fast as she could in the direction where there seemed to be the least number of people. Luckily, everyone was so concerned with their own survival that nobody harmed her.

After some running, her stomach began hurting intensely. Not able to go any further because of the pain, she lay down behind a sand dune and fainted. After what seemed like forever, she began to slowly come around. In the back of her mind, there seemed to be the crying noises of a baby. Not completely coherent, she still wasn't quite sure whether or not she was dead or alive. But the crying gradually got louder. She twitched and suddenly realized that there seemed to be a warm object between her legs. By now it was after midnight, the snow had just stopped and the moon had finally appeared from behind the parting clouds. She snapped wide awake and began to cry. In this impossible situation, the baby in her womb was born.

She immediately sat up and took the baby in her hands. It was a boy. Overjoyed and crying, she used her teeth to bite off the umbilical cord and hugged the baby as tightly as she could. In the moonlight, she saw that the infant's eyes were huge and bright and looked very much like her deceased husband and his crying was incredibly loud. Under normal circumstances, there should have been no way that she was going to survive after giving birth in such harsh conditions. But upon seeing her child, she suddenly found strength that

she didn't know she had and she slowly got up on her knees and with one hand, crawled into a small ditch close by to escape from the cold. Looking at the baby and thinking of her husband, bittersweet memories and emotions overwhelmed her.

The two of them spent the night in that ditch. The next morning, hearing nothing around her, she summoned up enough courage to climb out of it. Amongst the white snow and yellow sands, the ground was covered with discarded weapons and corpses. Nobody alive was to be seen.

She scrounged some preserved food from one of the dead soldiers as well as a fire making stone and knives. After carving some horse meat and cooking it, she searched around for some thicker clothing. She wrapped some around her baby and put some on herself as well. Luckily, the weather was so cold around this time of the year that nothing rots, so the horse meat was able to last her for a good few days, during which she was able to recover her strength. Then, carrying her baby, she began walking confidently towards the East. Even though she had lost the hated Duan Tiande, all the hatred in her heart submerged and turned into love and tenderness. All she wanted was to protect her baby's face from the harsh steppe winds.

After several more days, she noticed that the plant life around her was getting denser. This particular dusk, she suddenly spotted two horses galloping towards her. The riders noticed her and stopped to ask her what happened. Making wild gestures with her arms, she described her experience of meeting the defeated army and giving birth in the snow. These two riders were Mongolians. Even though they couldn't understand her at all, they, being the friendly and hospitable kind of people Mongolians are, felt sorry for her and invited her to spend the night with them in their Mongolian ger. Mongolians are a nomadic group of

people, migrating along with their herds and the seasons. They live in huge shelters called gers that are easily put up and taken down. The next morning this particular group of nomads departed, but they decided to leave her four small sheep to help her survive.

After much suffering and labor, Li Ping settled down on the steppe. She erected a little hut using tree branches and reeds and obtained food through barter using the sweaters she knitted from wool of the sheep.

Time flew, and the little boy was soon six years old. Following the wishes of her former husband, Li Ping gave him the name of Guo Jing. The boy was rather slow and only began to speak at the age of four. Luckily, he was a very strong boy and was able to herd the animals by himself. The two of them, mother and son, relied on each other, surviving on only the barest of essentials and leading a very simple and happy life. Both of them had learned Mongolian, and only when they were alone with each other did they speak in the Linan dialect of Chinese. Seeing the manly face on her son and hearing him speaking everything in the Linan dialect of her home frequently made her feel a bittersweet sadness: "Your father was a man among men in Shandong, you should by all means speak the Shandong dialect as well. But we weren't together a long enough time and I couldn't learn it from him, so I can't teach you."

It was October and the weather was slowly becoming colder and colder. Guo Jing climbed onto his own little pony and set out, with a shepherd dog, to herd the sheep. Around noon, a huge black eagle suddenly appeared in the sky and dove down towards the herd. A particular young sheep was frightened and began to run for its life towards the East. Guo Jing shouted several times at it to make the sheep stop, but it just kept on going.

Guo Jing immediately climbed onto his pony and went chasing after it. After 4 or 5 li or so, he finally caught up to the little sheep. Just as he was about to head back, he suddenly heard a very loud and constant rumble. Startled, he could not figure what the rumble was, even though he suspected that it might be thunder. The rumble got louder and louder until, after a while, he was able to detect the sounds of horses neighing and humans screaming within the rumbling. Having never heard such things before, he was frightened and hurriedly led his little pony and the sheep into a clump of bush on top of a nearby hill top. Only then did he dare to stick his head out to see what was going on.

What he saw was dust covering the sky as countless numbers of chariots rushed about. Several leaders were shouting out commands as the armies were lining up. One was to the East while another one was to the West and both contained more people than Guo Jing thought there were in the whole world. Everyone was wearing a white-colored bandana on their heads; some even stuck colorful feathers in them. By now Guo Jing wasn't frightened anymore; he was too curious and excited.

After another pause, from the left there suddenly came the sounds of horns and several rows of soldiers charged. They were led by a tall and thin looking young man wearing a blood red cape. He was holding his saber above his head, ready to strike at anyone he happened upon. The two armies clashed and gruesome fighting ensued. The attacking side was outnumbered and was slowly being overwhelmed and began to retreat. But reserves soon came in support and the fighting escalated to a deafening level once again.

It looked as if the attacking armies were about to collapse once again when the ten horns that had signaled the start



of the battle suddenly came to life again, making the noise level even more deafening than it had been. The attacking soldiers shouted: "Temujin is here! The Great Khan Temujin is here!" Even though the two armies were still fighting relentlessly, everyone's head periodically turned toward the East, where the horns were located.

Following their gaze, Guo Jing looked toward the East as well. Through all the sand and dust that was filling the sky, he saw a group of riders galloping forth. Within the group there was a huge pole, on which there were several white feathers. The cheering got louder as the riders got closer and the attackers seemed to fight more and more fiercely. The formations of the defending army were torn apart instantly. The huge pole slowly moved toward the very hill that Guo Jing was hiding on; he retreated even deeper into the bush, but was still peeking out with his huge, bright pair of eyes. He noticed a very big and tall middle-aged man in the midst of the riders who ridden onto the hill. He was wearing an iron helmet on his head and had a brown tuft of beard on his chin. His eyes were beaming with energy and force. What Guo Jing didn't know was that he was the leader of the Mongolian tribe, Temujin; but even if he did know, he wouldn't have known what a "khan" was.

On his horse, Temujin, accompanied by several riders, calmly surveyed the battle that was occurring at the foot of the hill. After a while, the young man with the red cape rode up the hill. "Father, there are too many of them, should we retreat a bit?" He shouted once he made it up the hill.

By now Temujin had already finished surveying the battlefield. In a low voice, he commanded: "Take your team and fall back to the East."

"Muqali, go with the second Prince and fall back to the west. Bogurchi, you and Tchila'un retreat to the north.

Kublai, you and Subotai take your army and head south." Temujin continued, never taking his eyes off the battlefield. "When you see my banner raised up high, that's my signal. Immediately sound the horns, turn around and counter-attack!" All the officers rode off with their orders. Within seconds, the Mongol troops began retreating on all fronts.

The enemy soldiers let out a great collective howl and, upon seeing Temujin's White Feathered Banner being raised high on the top of the hill, shouted in unison: "Capture Temujin... Capture Temujin!" Like ants, the opposing army began charging up the hill, completely ignoring the retreating Mongol troops. Horses and men charged with abandon; a yellow fog surrounded the hill from the dust they kicked up.

Temujin stood at the top of the hill, not moving and resolute. A score of foot soldiers held up their shields and were protecting him from arrows flying from all directions. Temujin's sworn brother Kutuku and standout general Jelme, along with three thousand elite troops, were defending the base of the hill with everything they could muster, determined to the last man.

Amid the flashing of blades and spears, the cries of battle were shaking the earth. Witnessing this, Guo Jing was at the same time excited and scared.

After an hour or so of intense fighting, and under the relentless charges of tens of thousands of enemy troops, Temujin's elite guard of three thousand had suffered about four hundred casualties while cutting down more than ten thousand enemies. Looking out, Temujin saw that even though the battlefield was covered with enemy bodies and rider-less horses running aimlessly, the number of enemy arrows flying in was still intense. On the northeastern end of the battle, the enemy attack was especially fierce and the defense looked closer and closer to collapse. "Father,"

Ogedai, Temujin's third son, anxiously asked, "is it time to raise the banner?"

"Their troops aren't tired yet!" Temujin answered gravely, not moving his eyes away from the battle, even for a moment.

By now there were three black banners at the northeast end of the battle, indicating that the enemy had gathered three standout generals there to command the troops. The Mongol defenders were steadily dropping back. Up the hill came Jelme, shouting at the top of his lungs: "Khan, we can't hold them any longer!"

"Can't hold them?" Temujin angrily shouted back. "What kind of man are you?"

Jelme's expression changed and he grabbed a saber from one of the foot soldiers. With a shout, he charged into the enemy formation. Fighting with utter abandon, he carved a path of blood to the black banners. The enemy commanders, seeing his ferocity, immediately pulled hard on their reins and backed away. Jelme, with three swings of his saber, cut down the three men that were carrying the banners. Throwing down his saber, he wrapped his arms around the three banners, took them back to the top of the hill, and stuck them into the ground upside down. Seeing this incredible display, the enemy's morale was rocked. The Mongol troops responded with fury and the hole in the defense on the northeast end was quickly plugged.

After more fighting, an enemy general with a black cape suddenly appeared in the southwest corner. Not wasting a shot, he quickly took down a dozen or so Mongol soldiers with his bow and arrows. Two Mongol officers turned and charged at him with their spears. Using only two arrows, he easily shot the two officers off their horses.

"Such amazing skill!" Even Temujin had to praise him after seeing that. By now, the general with the black cape had fought to near the foot of the hill. With the faint twang of a released bow, an arrow hit Temujin in his neck. Another arrow quickly followed, heading straight for Temujin's stomach. Realizing that he had been hit and another arrow was coming, Temujin immediately pulled hard on his reins, making his horse rear up on its hind legs. The arrow buried itself into the horse's chest all the way to the feathers, knocking the horse to the ground. Seeing the leader hit and falling, the Mongol troops were shocked. Screaming at the top of their lungs, and pouncing on the opportunity, the enemy charged forward like floodwater.

Ogedai had just finished helping his father pull out the arrow in his neck and was tearing off his shirt to bandage up the wound when Temujin shouted: "Forget about me, defend the hill!" Nodding quickly, Ogedai turned and immediately shot down two enemy officers.

Kutuku was commanding his troops guarding the west side of the hill, but, because they had run out of arrows and spears, he had to retreat. Jelme's eyes turned red as he saw him: "Kutuku, are you going to run like a scared rabbit?"

"Who's running?" Kutuku smiled back, "I ran out of arrows."

Temujin, still lying on the ground, took a handful of arrows and tossed them over to him. Kutuku quickly put an arrow onto his bow and shot the closest black bannered general off his horse. Quickly charging downhill, Kutuku grabbed that general's horse and returned.

"Brother, you are really something!" Temujin praised.

Covered with blood from head to toe, Kutuku quietly asked: "Can we raise the banner and sound the horns?"

"The enemy still isn't tired yet, just a bit longer." Temujin said, blood streaming down his palm that was pressing hard on the wound in his neck, trying to stop the bleeding.

Upon hearing that, Kutuku dropped to one knee and begged: "We owe our lives to you and have no reservations about dying here. But Khan, please, you have to take care of yourself."

Temujin shakily stood up, took the reins of the horse from Kutuku, and struggled mightily before finally mounting the horse. Waving his saber and shouting, "Hold the hill!" at the top of his lungs, he cut down three enemy soldiers that had charged up the hill. Seeing Temujin reappear, the opposing army's morale was shaken once again and the momentum shifted and they began to fall back down the hill.

"Raise the banners! Sound the horns!" Temujin commanded, seizing on the fact that their enemy's morale was at a low.

The Mongol army let out a collective howl as an officer climbed onto a horse, stood up, and raised the white feathered banner up as high as he could. The horns from all corners sounded. Immediately, the screaming of men drowned out the horns as row after row of Mongolian soldiers suddenly appeared from far away and approached with lightning speed.

The enemy outnumbered the Mongols, but they were gathered around the hill. As soon as the soldiers on the outer edge began to fall back, the middle of their formation became chaotic. The general in black, noticing that the tide was turning, immediately began giving orders in hopes of rallying his troops. But the formation had already collapsed and the soldiers had no desire to fight any longer. Within an hour, the army had been smashed into pieces; those who

weren't killed were running for their lives. The general in black, riding his black horse, turned and joined them.

"Fifty taels of gold for the man that catches that scoundrel!" Temujin shouted. This immediately sent several score of Mongolian elites after him.

The general in black, not missing a shot, turned and shot down about a dozen or so pursuers one after the other. The rest of the pursuers did not dare get too close and, in the end, let him get away. Seeing all this from inside the bushes, Guo Jing was in awe of that general's bravery and skill.

The battle was a complete victory for Temujin, destroying more than half of his nemesis, the Tatars, army. Surveying the battlefield, Temujin's memories of his past flashed before his eyes again: the poisoning of his father, being captured by the Taijiuts, and all the torture and shame he went through at their hands. Although his mental wounds were still not healed, his joyful heart was filled with the sweet taste of revenge. Unable to hold it in any longer, he leaned back and laughed in triumph. Every soldier joined in with cheers, which shook the earth as they began to organize into formations and leave the battlefield.

Guo Jing waited until even the gravediggers had left due to darkness before he came crawling out of the bush. It was midnight when he got home and his mother, who was on the verge of a nervous breakdown waiting for him to come back, was overjoyed to see him. Guo Jing described what had happened to his mom, as best as he could. Li Ping, seeing his face alight with joy and amazement and without a trace of fear, thought to herself, that even though he was just a kid and a bit dumb, he was still very much like his father in this respect. Bittersweet feelings filled her heart.

Two mornings later, Li Ping went off to the marketplace 30 li away with two hand made wool blankets. Guo Jing was guarding the sheep out in front of his house when his mind wandered back to what he had seen two days ago. Deciding to have a little fun, he raised his shepherding whip and began waving it around. Riding on his little horse, shouting at the top of his lungs, and moving the flock around, he felt just like a general commanding his own troops into battle. Just as he was really getting into it, he suddenly heard the sound of horse hooves from the east. A solitary horse slowly approached with a person lying on its back. The horse got close and stopped, causing the man on the back of the horse to lift his head and look up. The sight of the man made Guo Jing shriek in fear.

The man's face was covered with mud, dirt, and blood. It was the general in black that he had seen the day before yesterday. In his left hand was the bottom half of what had been a saber, which was stained purplish red with blood. The bow and arrows that he had fought so many foes with were gone. It looked as if he had another encounter with his enemies after escaping two days ago. His left cheek had been slashed open and was bleeding profusely. His horse was injured as well. His body shuddered as his blood-shot eyes fell upon Guo Jing, muttering in a hoarse and exhausted voice: "Water, water... some water?"

Guo Jing immediately ran into the house and brought out a bowl of water from the water tub. That man grabbed it out of Guo Jing's hand and drank it all in one gulp. "More!" He demanded.

Guo Jing retrieved another bowl for him. He drank half before the blood dripping off of his face turned the water red. The man let out a loud laugh, then suddenly, his face twitched and he fell off his horse and fainted.

Guo Jing panicked; he didn't know what to do. Luckily, the man came to after a while. "Give my horse some water too," he said, "and do you have anything to eat?"

Guo Jing brought out some roasted lamb for him and got a whole bucket of water for the horse. After gulping down the hearty meal, the man was thoroughly refreshed and got up off the ground.

"Thanks, brother." He said as he took off the gold bracelet he had around his wrist and held it out at Guo Jing. "Here, take it."

Guo Jing shook his head: "Mom said that we should take care of guests and not ask for or take anything in return."

The man laughed at this and commented: "You are a good kid!" He put the bracelet back on his wrist, tore off half of his sleeve, and began to attend to both his and his horse's wounds. Suddenly, from the east came the faint rumblings of horses galloping. The man's face dropped: "Huh, looks like they are not going to let me go!"

The two of them ran out of the door and saw that the land in the distance was covered by dust kicked up by countless horses heading this way.

"Kid, do you have a bow and arrows in the house?" The man asked.

"Yah, sure." Guo Jing replied just before darting back into the house. Hearing that, the man looked somewhat relieved, but that soon changed when he saw that Guo Jing had just brought out his own little toy bow and arrow. He let out a little laugh before frowning: "I need the fighting kind, the big one." Guo Jing merely shook his head.



The pursuers were getting closer, their banners could be faintly seen waving in the distance. The man figured that, with his horse injured, he wouldn't be able to get away. While hiding is always dangerous, he had no alternative. "I can't beat them all by myself, so I've got to hide." He said, turning to Guo Jing. He looked around and noticed that there was nowhere to hide in or around the hut. In desperation, he settled on the big pile of grass outside.

"I'm going to hide in there. Could you chase my horse as far away as you can? Be sure to find a good place to hide for yourself too and don't let them catch you." he instructed as he dug himself into the grass pile. Traditionally, as soon as the scorching summer has passed, Mongolians would immediately cut down all the available tall grass and pile it up. During the harsh winters, Mongolians relied on these grass piles for feed for the animals as well as fire for warmth. Often these grass piles would be bigger than their gers. The man was actually very well hidden inside the grass pile and probably wouldn't be discovered without careful inspection.

Guo Jing turned and gave the black horse a couple of good lashes, causing the horse to gallop off. Only until it was almost entirely out of sight did it finally stop and started to graze. Guo Jing jumped onto his little horse and took off to the west.

The pursuers, noticing that someone was there, sent two advanced scouts forward to give chase. Guo Jing's pony wasn't fast and the two scouts soon caught up. "Kid, did you see a man riding a black horse around here?" One of them demanded.

Guo Jing didn't know how to tell a lie, so he couldn't find the words to answer the question. The two scouts asked several more times, but there was still no answer. "Let's take him to

the First Prince!", one of them finally suggested, seeing blank looking face on the kid. The two scouts took hold of Guo Jing's reins and led him back to the hut.

"I just won't say." Guo Jing made up his mind on the way back.

A good number of Mongolian soldiers surrounded a tall and skinny young man. Guo Jing recognized the face, he had seen him on the hill two days before. Noticing that the soldiers were all obeying his commands, Guo Jing decided that he was an enemy of that black robed general. "What did the little kid say?" The First Prince shouted.

"This kid is scared stiff; he hasn't said a word."

The First Prince looked around and suddenly noticed the black horse grazing in the distance. "Is that his horse? Go and bring it here," he quietly ordered. Ten Mongols split into five groups and quietly surrounded the horse. By the time the horse noticed and tried to escape, it had already run out of places to run.

"Isn't this Jebe's horse?" The First Prince asked rhetorically in an arrogant voice. "Yes sir, it is!" The soldiers answered in unison.

The First Prince, using his riding whip, lashed the side of Guo Jing's head and shouted: "Where is he hiding? Spit it out. Think you can fool me?"

Hiding in the pile of dried grass, Jebe held his broken saber tightly. Seeing Guo Jing getting hit and a huge welt immediately starting to develop on his head, his heart began to beat wildly. He knew that this was Temujin's eldest son, Jochi, whose cruelty and savagery was famous throughout the entire Steppe. He figured that the kid would

undoubtedly be frightened into telling where he was hiding, and then he would have to jump out and fight to the death.

Guo Jing wanted to cry, but, trying with all his might, he kept back the tears. Holding his head up high, he asked: "Why did you hit me? I didn't do anything wrong!" He knew kids only get beaten when they did something wrong.

"Trying to be tough huh?" Jochi shouted angrily before he whipped Guo Jing again, making Guo Jing burst out crying.

By now other soldiers had already given Guo Jing's house a thorough search. Two of the soldiers even poked about the grass pile with their spears. Luckily, the grass pile was huge and they didn't hit Jebe. "The horse is still here, he couldn't have gone far. Kid, are you going to tell or not!" Jochi continued as he lashed at Guo Jing's head three more times. Guo Jing reached out and tried to grab the riding whip, but how could he?

Suddenly, they heard horns sounding from afar. "The Khan is coming!" All of the soldiers shouted as Jochi stopped and turned to greet his father. "Father!" He shouted as an army with Temujin at the head came galloping in.

The wound that Jebe inflicted on Temujin turned out to be severe. During the battle Temujin was able to fight through it, but after the battle was over he actually fainted several times from the pain. His trusted general Jelme and third son Ogedai took turns sucking the bad blood clots out of his wound. The officers and his sons waited by his bedside for an entire night until he was no longer in mortal danger. The next morning, swearing to catch Jebe and quarter him so as to avenge this wound to the Khan, the Mongol soldiers spread out in all directions. By dusk on the second day, a small scout team finally ran into Jebe, but was decimated by him. However, Jebe was injured as well in the melee. Upon

hearing the news, Temujin immediately sent his eldest son Jochi after him before taking his other sons with him as a rear guard.

"Father, we found that bastard's horse!" Jochi reported, pointing at the black horse.

"I don't want the horse, I want him!" Temujin replied.

"Yes father, we will find him." Jochi answered before returning to Guo Jing's side. Pulling out his saber, he swung it in the air a couple of times and shouted: "Are you going to tell me?"

His face covered in blood from the earlier beating, Guo Jing actually got feistier and shouted back: "I'll never tell! I'll never tell!"

From that response, Temujin noted how innocent the kid was, replying with "I'll never tell" instead of "I don't know", giving away the fact that he knew where Jebe was hiding. So he turned to Ogedai and whispered: "Go and trick it out of him."

Smiling, Ogedai walked up to Guo Jing, removed two gold studded peacock feathers from his helmet and said: "If you tell me, this is yours."

"I'll never tell!" Guo Jing still replied.

"Let loose the dogs!" Chagatai, Temujin's second son ordered as the soldiers immediately brought forth six huge hunting dogs.

Mongolians love to hunt and all of the aristocrats or people of wealth own hunting dogs and falcons. Chagatai especially loved dogs and this search for Jebe presented a perfect use for his dogs. So he ordered the dogs be taken around the black horse a couple of times before letting them loose to

find where Jebe was hiding. The dogs barked wildly as they ran in and out of the hut repeatedly.

Guo Jing had never met Jebe before, but two days ago he had greatly admired his bravery and skill on the battlefield. Being whipped several times by Jochi had brought out Guo Jing's natural stubbornness and feisty nature. He called his shepherd dog. By now Chagatai's hunting dogs were getting very close to the grass pile, so, on Guo Jing's command, the shepherd dog positioned itself between the grass pile and the hunting dogs, not letting any of them get closer. Chagatai gave a loud shout and all six huge hunting dogs leapt forward and the air was quickly filled with the cacophony of dog barking as the seven dogs fought. The shepherd dog, smaller to begin with and battling one against six, was quickly covered with bite marks but still fought back ferociously, not backing down one bit. Guo Jing was cheering his shepherd dog on loudly between sobs. Seeing this, Temujin, Ogedai, and everyone present knew that Jebe must be hiding in the grass pile, so they just smiled and enjoyed the show of the dog fight.

Furious, Jochi began to hit Guo Jing with his riding whip again, causing him to roll around in pain. He rolled next to Jochi's legs before suddenly jumping up and grabbing his right leg. Jochi tried to throw him off with a kick, but the boy's grip was surprisingly strong and he couldn't get him off. The other sons, seeing their older brother in such an awkward and embarrassing state, began to laugh loudly. Even Temujin began to snicker a bit. His face flushing blood red, Jochi unsheathed his saber and brought it down toward Guo Jing's head. Just as it looked as if the kid was about to be hit, a broken saber suddenly struck out from inside the grass pile. "Clang!" The two sabers collided and Jochi, feeling his hand go numb, almost dropped his saber.

The soldiers let out a collective gasp as Jebe jumped out of the pile.

Pulling Guo Jing behind him with his left hand, he sneered: "Bullying a little kid, have you no shame?"

The soldiers immediately readied their spears and surrounded Jebe. Seeing that he had nowhere to run, Jebe tossed aside the broken saber. Jochi charged at him and landed a punch on his chest with Jebe not even trying to protect himself.

"Kill me now!" He shouted, but then he added with in a quiet and heavy voice: "Pity that I cannot die at the hands of a true hero!"

"What did you say?" Temujin cut in.

"To die on the battlefields, at hands of the hero that beat me, is dying with no regrets. But today the eagle has fallen onto the ground and was bitten to death by ants!" Jebe replied with fury in his eyes and let out a tremendous howl. Chagatai's hunting dogs, who had collectively pinned Guo Jing's shepherd dog onto the ground and were relentlessly biting it, jumped at the howl and ran away whimpering behind their trainers.

"Khan, don't let this little bastard boast like that." A person stepped out from beside Temujin and shouted. "Let me duel with him!"

"Alright, have a duel with him." Temujin replied, happily discovering that the man was Bogurchi. "We don't have much of anything else, but we do have some heroes."

"I'm going to kill you by myself, so that you can die with no regrets." Bogurchi took a few steps forward and shouted at Jebe.

"Who the hell are you?" Jebe shouted back, noticing that the challenger was very well built and had a very deep and loud voice.

"I'm Bogurchi! Heard of me before?"

A cold feeling shot through Jebe's heart: "So this is him; rumors say that Bogurchi is the hero of heroes among the Mongols." Not wanting to reply, he simply shot a sideways look and hmpfhed.

"You boast about your skills with the bow and arrow, and others even call you Jebe. Why don't you and this friend of mine have a little shooting contest?" Temujin declared. In Mongolian, "Jebe" means both "arrow" and "divine archer." Jebe had another name, but because of his incredible skill with the bow and arrow, everyone called him Jebe and his real name had long been forgotten. [Note: According to Mongol records, when he first entered Temujin's tribe, Jebe gave his name as Jirgadei.]

"So you are a friend of his?" Jebe shouted at Bogurchi. "Then I guess I'll kill you first." This remark caused all of the Mongol soldiers to let out an audible laugh, for everyone of them knew that Bogurchi was unbeatable as a fighter and was famous through out the entire Steppe. Even though they saw how great Jebe was with the bow, claiming to be able to kill Bogurchi was just a bit too much for them to stomach.

Back when Temujin was still a boy, he was once captured by the Taijiuts, who placed him in a wooden neck collar. The many tribes of the Taijiuts gathered at the Onon River to celebrate by drinking and whipping him at the same time. After the gatherers were sufficiently drunk, Temujin knocked his guard unconscious with his collar and escaped into the nearby woods.

The Taijiuts conducted a massive search trying to find him. It was then that he met a young man named Tchila'un who, in spite of the enormous danger, took him into his house. It was Tchila'un who smashed the collar off of him and threw it in the fire; and it was also Tchila'un who hid him in a cart of fleece. When the Taijiut scouts came around and searched Tchila'un's house, they came upon the cart of fleece and began to take it off layer by layer.

Just as Temujin's feet were going to be revealed, Tchila'un's father suddenly interrupted: "Such a hot day, how could anyone hide in a pile of fleece? If he did he's probably roasted to death by now."

It was dead in the middle of summer and everyone was sweating profusely. The scouts thought what he said made sense and didn't look any further. Temujin's life was filled with dangerous moments and close calls, but this was the most dangerous and closest call of them all.

After he ran away, Temujin lived a squalid existence along with his mother and brother and they were forced to rely on captured prairie squirrels and marmots to survive. One day, the eight white horses that Temujin had were stolen by a small group of thieves from the Taijiut tribe. As Temujin rode after them all by himself, he ran into another young man who was milking his horse. When Temujin stopped to inquire about the thieves, he learned that the young man's name was Bogurchi.

"Our lives are full of the same hardships," Bogurchi said, "let's be friends."

The two of them rode off together. It was three days before they finally caught up to the thieving tribe. The two of them, by themselves, took on a couple hundred foes and took back



those eight horses. Temujin offered to split the horses with him and asked him how many he wanted.

"I did this as a friend, so I won't take a single one." was Bogurchi's answer. From that day forth, the two of them worked together and Temujin continued to insist on calling him his good friend. Theirs was a true friendship forged in times of trouble.

Bogurchi and Tchila'un, together with Muqali and Boroqul were the four foremost founding generals of the Mongolian Empire.

Knowing how great Bogurchi was with the bow, Temujin handed his own bow to Bogurchi and hopped off his white colt. "Ride my horse, use my bow and arrows, then it'll be as if I killed him."

"Yes sir!" Bogurchi hopped onto Temujin's treasured horse with bow and arrows in hand. Turning to Ogedai, he said: "Let Jebe use your horse."

"Well, lucky him." Ogedai commented before hopping off and ordering a guard to walk the horse over to Jebe.

"I am already surrounded," Jebe turned to Temujin after securing himself onto the saddle, "if you wanted to kill me, it would have been easier than killing a sheep. Since you have already showed mercy by letting me duel him with the bow, I dare not ask for anything more. Therefore I ask only for a bow and no arrows."

"No arrows?" Bogurchi shouted feeling insulted.

"That's right. I can kill you with just a bow!"

This time the laughter from the Mongolian soldiers was even louder. "What a braggart!" One of them shouted as Temujin ordered him to hand over his best bow to Jebe.

Bogurchi had seen Jebe in action during battle and knew very well what a great marksman he was and didn't dare to take him lightly. However, with no arrows, how could Jebe apply his great skill? Bogurchi, knowing that Jebe must be planning to use the arrows that he himself shot, gave his horse a good squeeze with his legs, urging it into a gallop. Not only was this particular colt fast, it had been through many a battle and was especially perceptive to the whims of its rider. Because of this, Temujin had taken quite a liking to it.

In response of the opponent's speed, Jebe pulled on the reins, making his horse slowly back up. Bogurchi fitted an arrow onto the bow and, aiming directly at Jebe's face, let loose. Jebe tilted his body and with incredible hand-eye coordination grabbed the arrow by the shaft out of mid-air.

"Oh that's good." Bogurchi muttered under his breath and shot another arrow.

Hearing the arrow's feathers slicing through the air, Jebe knew that he would not be able to catch this one. He leaned forward, laying his body flat against the neck of the horse. The arrow flew over his head, barely missing grazing him. Immediately he made his horse gallop forward with a little kick and sat back up. But what he didn't know was that Bogurchi was a master at shooting arrows one after another and two more arrows bore down on him. Not expecting such skill from his foe, Jebe was forced to immediately slip off his saddle and, hooking his right foot through the stirrup, leaned almost to the ground. The horse was still galloping at full speed, making it look as if there was a dancing bird at its side. Jebe twisted his body around. He had already loaded that arrow he had just caught onto the bow when he was barely half around, and let loose aiming at Bogurchi's belly. Then he immediately flipped back up onto the saddle.

"Excellent!" Bogurchi shouted as he aimed at the coming arrow and let loose. The two arrows met nearly head on and shot off in different directions before both arrows, still carrying a great force, stuck into the ground with their feathers up. The exchange caused Temujin and all other spectators to cheer in amazement.

Bogurchi feigned shooting to the left, waited until Jebe reacted to the right before suddenly letting off a shot towards the right. Jebe flicked his bow with his left hand and knocked the arrow down onto the ground. Bogurchi followed with another three shots, all of which were dodged by Jebe. Jebe, speeding his horse up, suddenly slipped off the saddle, reached down, picked up three arrows off the ground, sat back up, and shot one of them all in one motion.

Wanting to show off a bit of his own skills, Bogurchi jumped onto his saddle. Keeping his balance with his left leg, he kicked away the arrow with his right foot. Then, still standing, he used the height advantage and let loose an especially fierce shot. Jebe pulled his horse to the side to dodge the shot and responded with another shot, which, with a "crack", split the arrow that Bogurchi had shot, in half along the shaft.

"He doesn't even have any arrows and yet we are fighting to a draw up to now. How can I get revenge for the Khan?" Bogurchi thought to himself. Getting impatient, Bogurchi began to shoot arrows one after another nonstop, so much so that it all became a blur to the spectators. Not having enough time to grab the arrows, Jebe was forced into just dodging them. However, the arrows just kept on flying in and they kept on getting faster and more numerous until finally, he was hit in his left shoulder. Seeing this everyone present cheered in unison.

Ecstatic, Bogurchi was just about to shoot several more arrows and end Jebe's life when he reached down into his arrow bag and came up empty. He had actually used up all of his arrows while he was showering Jebe with them. He always brought a tremendous number of arrows with him when he entered a battle, two quivers on his side and six more on the horse for a total of eight quivers filled with arrows. However, this time he was using the Khan's own supply of arrows and, in the midst of battle, he had forgotten that there was a limit on arrows and resorted to his habitual way of using them. Shocked to discover that he had used all of his arrows, he immediately turned his horse around and reached down to pick up some arrows from the ground.

Clearly seeing all of this, Jebe pounced on the opportunity. Before the sound of the arrow piercing through the air had faded from everyone's ears, the arrow had already hit Bogurchi's back, right where his heart was. The spectators gasped in shock. But strangely, even though this arrow was shot with great force and caused a wave of pain to shoot through Bogurchi's back, it didn't penetrate his clothing and fell off onto the ground. Bogurchi reached down, picked up the arrow, and inspected it. It turned out that Jebe had actually taken off the arrowhead as a show of mercy. He flipped himself back onto the saddle and shouted: "I am seeking revenge for my Khan. I don't need your mercy!"

"I, Jebe, never show any mercy to my enemies! That last arrow was to exchange one life for another!"

When he saw Bogurchi hit, Temujin was devastated. However, now that he realized that Bogurchi was not dying, he was overjoyed. At this moment he would have absolutely been willing to trade all of the sheep, oxen, and horses in his tribe in exchange for Bogurchi's life without the

slightest bit of hesitation. Hearing Jebe's remark, he immediately answered: "Alright, there's no need to go any further. You let him go so I'm letting you go. His life for your life."

"I'm not asking to exchange my life for his life."

"What then?" Temujin was puzzled.

"I'm asking for an exchange for his life!" Jebe answered, pointing at Guo Jing, who was standing by the door of the hut. "I ask that the Khan not trouble this boy further."

"As for me..." He continued, raising one of his eyebrows higher. "I wounded the Khan and deserve whatever punishment that comes to me. Bogurchi, come on!" As he finished, he pulled the arrow from his shoulder and, with blood still dripping off of it, fitted it onto his bow. By now, Bogurchi's underlings had re-supplied him with six more quivers of arrows. "Alright, let's try this again!" Bogurchi replied as he showered Jebe with arrows. The arrows were coming so fast that they seemed almost connected, creating a chain of arrows in the air.

Seeing the situation, Jebe, holding himself up by hooking his foot through the stirrup, flipped himself beneath his horse's belly. Leaning sideways so as to not hit the ground, he aimed and fired a shot at Bogurchi's stomach. The white colt, not waiting for his master to pull the reins, instinctively dodged to the left. Unfortunately, the shot from Jebe was much faster than any normal shot and the colt was not able to get out of the way in time. With a thud, the arrow hit the colt in the head and instantly brought it down.

Lying on the ground, Bogurchi dare not risk Jebe shooting a follow up shot; he immediately twisted around and fired another shot, snapping the bow in Jebe's hand. Losing his weapon, Jebe cursed the fact he wasn't able to fight back

any longer, and he had to resort to zigzagging in an effort to dodge Bogurchi's shots. The Mongolian soldiers present all began to shout and cheer for Bogurchi as he loaded another arrow onto the bow. "He really is quite a hero!" Bogurchi thought as he aimed for Jebe's back and let loose.

A great marksman never misses when it matters and this arrow hit Jebe on the back of his head. Jebe's body shook and he fell off the horse, the arrow falling to his side. Bogurchi, not able to bring himself to kill such a hero, had also taken the arrowhead off of his arrow. Bogurchi loaded another arrow onto his bow and aimed at Jebe before turning towards Temujin: "Great Khan, I ask you to show mercy and let him go!"

By now, Temujin had grown to admire Jebe's courage and skill, so he shouted: "Are you still not going to surrender?"

Seeing Temujin sitting there in all his glory and magnificence, Jebe was suddenly won over. He ran over as fast as he could and, with his head lowered, knelt down in front of Temujin.

Temujin let out a hearty laugh: "Wonderful! Wonderful! From now on, you are with me!"

Mongolians frequently sing to express their feelings and thoughts. At this moment, still kneeling on the ground, Jebe began to sing: "Oh Great Khan, you showed me mercy and let me live. In the future, be it jumping into boiling water or walking on fire, I will do it. I would cross the black seas and crush the mountains to protect the Great Khan. Conquering foes, digging out their hearts! Just ask of me and I will do it. For the Khan I would lead charges and run one million li a day!"

Ecstatic at the turn of events, Temujin took out two gold ingots and give one each to Bogurchi and Jebe. Jebe

thanked him and asked: "Great Khan, is it permitted that I give this ingot to that boy?"

"My gold I can give to whoever I want," Temujin replied with a smile, "your gold you can give to whoever you want!"

Jebe walked over to Guo Jing and held out the ingot. But Guo Jing just shook his head: "Mom said that helping guests is the right thing to do and that it's wrong to take anything from guests."

Temujin had grown to like Guo Jing because of the unyielding toughness the boy showed earlier. Hearing those words now, he liked Guo Jing even more.

"Bring the boy into our tribe as well." He instructed Jebe before leading the soldiers back. Several of the soldiers stayed behind to put the white colt's corpse on the backs of two horses before leaving as well. Able to save his own life and find a master at the same time, Jebe was overjoyed and tired. So he lay down on the ground, rested until Li Ping returned from the market, and explained to her what had happened.

"Now that's a good son," Li Ping said to Guo Jing upon hearing of how courageous and loyal he was, even though she was greatly distressed by all the wounds on his face. "That's how a man should act and behave." She figured that joining the army and going through the vigorous training would be much better for Guo Jing than shepherding, especially if Guo Jing was to avenge his father. So the mother and son followed Jebe into Temujin's tribe.

Temujin made Jebe a Squad Leader under the command of his third son, Ogedai [Wo Kuo Tai]. After meeting with the Third Prince, Jebe met up with Bogurchi. Fueled by mutual respect, the two of them became fast friends. Feeling he owed Guo Jing a debt of gratitude, Jebe took great care in

looking after the mother and son. He decided that he would begin teaching Guo Jing about the bow as soon as Guo Jing got a little older.

On one particular day, Guo Jing was just tossing some rocks around with a couple of Mongolian kids when they saw two Mongolian riders flying into the camp, obviously carrying urgent news for the Khan. Not long after the two riders had entered Temujin's ger, the horns started to sound, causing the soldiers to pour out of their gers. Temujin had an iron fist when it came to the training and discipline of his army. Ten soldiers were organized into a squad, which was led by a Squad Leader. The squads were ordered into platoons made up of ten squads that were led by a Hundred Man Commander, ten Hundred Man groups were led by a Thousand Man Commander, which were then organized under one of the few Ten-Thousand Man Commanders. When Temujin gave an order, it was as if he just moved his fingers and no order was disobeyed or not carried out.

As Guo Jing and the other children looked on and at the end of the first blow of the horns, all the soldiers had already picked up their weapons and mounted their horses. When the horns sounded for the second time, the world shook from the sound of men and beasts moving. By the time the third sounding of the horns came to a stop, the plain just outside of the main gates of the encampment was covered with some fifty-thousand mounted men and soldiers in formation. Other than the snorting of horses, there wasn't another sound, neither chattering noises of conversations nor any sounds of weapons colliding.

Temujin, escorted closely behind by his three eldest sons, walked out of the main gate. "We have beaten many foes and news of our feats has reached the Great Jin Empire." He shouted at the top of his lungs. "At this moment, the great Emperor of the Jin has sent the Third Prince and



Sixth Prince here to officially anoint your Khan as a Jin officer!"

The soldiers, in unison, raised their sabers and shouted with joy. At that time, the Jin controlled Northern China with a fierce and strong army. Their empire was famous and powerful. On the other hand, the Mongols were just a small tribe among many in the middle of the Steppe. That was the reason why Temujin would feel honored to be an official of the Jin Empire. Temujin ordered the eldest son Jochi to take ten-thousand men with him to welcome and escort the guests while the other forty thousand men lined up in formation, waiting.

In reality, the Jurchen Emperor at the time, Wanyan Jing, who took the title of Zhang Zong, was apprehensive of growing power of some tribes on the Steppe such as Temujin's tribe, the Toghril, Ong Khan's tribe and the Keraites. Fearing that his northern neighbors would grow to be troublesome, he sent the Prince of Rong, his third son Wanyan Hongxi, and the Prince of Zhao, his sixth son Wanyan Honglie to anoint the leaders as officers of Jin. But in addition to tightening the ties of the tribes to Jin and increasing tributes, the princes had another mission: to scout the tribes and make note of the weakness of each so as to be able to gain the upper hand in case of future conflicts. The Prince of Zhao, Wanyan Honglie, was the same one that had traveled to Linan, was wounded by Qiu Chuji at Ox Village, and met the Seven Freaks at Jiaying.

Guo Jing and the kids stood at a distance, trying to catch a glimpse of this happening. After a long wait, a cloud of dust appeared on the horizon as Jochi met up with Wanyan Hongxi and Wanyan Honglie. The Wanyan brothers had with them ten-thousand elite soldiers, each wearing silk capes, iron armor and carrying a spear in the left hand and a wolf-fang club in the right hand while riding on their

horses. The clanging of the armor could be heard for many li around. As the army got closer the silk shone and the armor glowed even more under the bright sun, creating a spectacular scene. The two brothers approached shoulder to shoulder, while Temujin, his sons and generals waited by the roadside to welcome them. Seeing Guo Jing and all the other kids standing there staring at him, Wanyan Hongxi burst out laughing. He reached into his shirt and took out a handful of gold coins and tossed them towards the crowd of kids. "A gift for you kids!" He shouted with a laugh, figuring that the kids would undoubtedly cheer and scramble around on the ground for the money which would show off of his own magnanimity and wealth.

However, host-guest etiquette and respect was of utmost importance to the Mongolians. Not only were his actions inappropriate for the occasion, it was very disrespectful. The Mongol generals and soldiers were left aghast at his actions. Every one of the kids was a son or daughter of the Mongolian soldiers and generals. Even though they were little, each of them had a sense of self-respect. As a result, none of them picked up the coins. His joy dampened, Wanyan Hongxi tossed another handful of gold coins and shouted: "Come on! Fight over them little devils that you are!"

This caused an even bigger stir upon the Mongols. Even though the Mongolians had no written language at the time and little culture, they placed a great deal of importance on politeness and respect, especially regarding guests. Mongolians, traditionally, never curse, even when facing a lifelong nemesis or just joking around. When someone enters their gers, no matter if the person was a friend or not, that person would be treated with great respect and honor. By the same token, the guest must absolutely not disrespect his hosts either, for it was considered the

greatest of insults. Even though what Wanyan Hongxi shouted was in Jurchen and none of the Mongols understood it, everyone could tell that he was cursing at the kids from his body language and the tone of his voice.

Constantly being told stories of how the Jin rape, pillage, and steal from the people of China; of how the Jin corrupted officials and had Yue Fei killed, Guo Jing's young heart had long been filled with hatred for the Jin. Now, seeing how rude this Jin Prince was, he picked up a couple of gold coins from the ground and, taking a little run, threw them at Wanyan Hongxi with all his might. "Who would want your money?" He shouted. Wanyan Hongxi tilted his head sideways to avoid the coins; but nevertheless, one of them hit him squarely on the cheekbone. Even though Guo Jing wasn't strong and it really didn't hurt, he was still made to look bad in front of tens of thousands of people. Every Mongolian from Temujin downwards cheered on the inside.

Wanyan Hongxi was furious. When he was in China, he had many times killed people at his slightest displeasure. Never had he been humiliated like this. As his temper flared up, he grabbed a spear from the guard that was riding at his side and threw it at Guo Jing's chest with all his might and shouted: "You want to die you little bastard?"

"Third Brother...no!" Wanyan Honglie shouted, knowing this was bad. But he was too late; the spear was already on its way. Just as it looked as if Guo Jing was about die from the spear, an arrow suddenly shot out of the Mongolian army to the left. Like a meteor shooting around the moon, the arrow hit the spear dead on the head with a loud "bang!" Packed with incredible strength, the arrow was able to deflect the spear away despite being many times lighter. Guo Jing immediately scrambled away. The Mongolian soldiers all cheered in unison, shaking the

Steppe. The person who shot the arrow was none other than Jebe.

"Third Brother, don't bother with him anymore!" Wanyan Honglie whispered to his brother. Seeing and hearing the might of the Mongolian army, Wanyan Hongxi was a bit shaken, so he just shot a mean look at Guo Jing and cursed under his breath: "Little bastard!"

At this point, Temujin and his retainers had come forth to formally welcome the two Jin Princes and took them into the main ger. There they served up koumiss and vast quantities beef and lamb. There were translators on both sides, translating between Jurchen and Mongolian. Wanyan Hongxi read the royal decree out loud, granting the title of 'The Northern Ambassador of the Empire of the Jin' to Temujin. Temujin, who knelt on the floor during the reading, humbly accepted the official document and the Golden Belt, which signified his allegiance to the Jin Emperor. [Note: Koumiss is a very strong Mongolian alcoholic drink made from horse milk.] That night the Mongolians celebrated with a huge feast to entertain the honored emissaries.

"Tomorrow, my brother and I are going to bestow a post on Ong Khan." Wanyan Hongxi, somewhat under the influence of koumiss, said to Temujin. "Will the Ambassador join us?"

Temujin was overjoyed at the news and immediately agreed to come along. Ong Khan, a Toghril, was the leader among the tribes on the Steppe. His tribe was the richest and most powerful; furthermore, he was a good man, always treating others as equals. It was no great exaggeration to say that he was respected and liked by every tribe. Ong Khan had once been the sworn brother of Temujin's father. After Temujin's father was poisoned by his enemies and Temujin had nowhere to go, it was Ong Khan who took him as a

step-son. Not long after Temujin was married, his wife was taken away by the Merkits. It was only because of Ong Khan and Jamuka, Temujin's sworn brother, joining him that he managed to defeat the Merkits and save his wife. That was the reason Temujin was elated on hearing that Ong Khan would be granted a title as well. "Is the Great Jin Empire going to grant titles to anyone else?" He asked.

"No, that's all." Wanyan Hongxi replied. "But that's entirely because, up here in the North, there are only two great heroes: Ong Khan and the Great Khan yourself." Wanyan Honglie immediately added onto his brother's statement. "None of the others are worthy."

"There is another person around here that perhaps Your Excellencies haven't heard of." Temujin replied.

"Really? Who?" Wanyan Honglie asked.

"He just happens to be your humble servant's sworn brother, Jamuka. He's a righteous man who is very adept at commanding an army. I humbly request that the Third Prince and the Sixth Prince consider granting him a title as well."

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Temujin and Jamuka were childhood friends who grew up together and at that time they became sworn brothers. When Mongolians become sworn brothers, they call it swearing "anda", which was Mongolian for sworn brother. Mongolian tradition dictates that when swearing anda, the sides must exchange gifts. At the time, Jamuka gave Temujin a granite stone that resembled a deer thighbone while Temujin gave Jamuka a granite stone that looked like it was made of brass. Mongolians used small granite rocks to hunt rabbits, but Mongolian kids often played catch with them and competed to see who threw them the furthest.

After the two became andas, they went and threw rocks on the frozen Onon River. The next Spring, while the two of them were out shooting arrows with their own little wooden bows, Jamuka gave Temujin a noisy-arrowhead that he carved himself using two little ox horns, Temujin returned the gift with a cypress tipped arrowhead and the two of them swore to become anda once more. [Note: noisy arrowheads are arrowheads that are carved with slits in them so that they create a very loud screeching noise once they were shot. These arrows are often used to relay messages and orders in battle.]

After they grew up, both of them lived with Ong Khan's tribe and were still very close. Everyday they would compete to see who got up earlier; whichever one got up earlier would get to drink one cup of koumiss out of Ong Khan's own jade cup. Later, after Temujin's wife was kidnapped and was rescued with the combined help of Jamuka and Ong Khan, Temujin and Jamuka exchanged gold and horses and became sworn anda to each other for a third time. The two of them drank out of the same cup in the day and slept in the same ger at night. However, having to migrate with the changing weather and rain, they and their tribes parted. As Temujin's tribe rose in fame and power, Jamuka's tribe was growing nonstop as well. Their friendship was still as strong as ever and was deeper than blood brothers. That's why Temujin, realizing that his brother was not being honored, would ask for him to be honored as well.

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"There are so many Mongolians, where can we find all the titles if we give one to each of them? How many titles do you think we have?" Wanyan Hongxi, half drunk, casually answered back without much thought. Wanyan Honglie shot

his brother numerous meaningful looks trying to get him to stop, but was ignored.

Feeling slighted because of the remark, Temujin offered: "Might Your Excellencies consider giving your humble servant's title to him instead?"

"Are you belittling the titles of the Great Empire of the Jin?" Wanyan Hongxi slapped his leg and shouted. Temujin slammed his palm down on his table and stood up in anger. Finally, barely holding back his fury, he did not say another word and grabbed his cup and drank its conger in one gulp. Wanyan Honglie immediately told a joke and changed the subject.

The next morning, Temujin and his four sons organized five-thousand troops to escort Wanyan Hongxi and Wanyan Honglie to Ong Khan. By the time the sun was barely peeking over the distant horizon, Temujin had already mounted his horse and the five-thousand soldiers had already lined up in perfect formation. The Jurchen soldiers and generals, however, were still fast asleep.

At first, Temujin was impressed by the Jurchen army's grandeur and organization. But after seeing what an undisciplined and fun seeking group they were, he humphed and turned to Muqali, "What do you think of the Jin army?"

"A thousand of us Mongolian troops can defeat five-thousand of theirs!" Muqali observed.

"I've thought so too," Temujin replied with a smile. "But it's said that the Jin Empire has an army of over one million strong. We only have fifty thousand people."

"A million troops can't enter battle all at once," Muqali responded. "Divide and conquer, we can take down ten

thousand today and then sweep another ten thousand tomorrow."

"When it comes to military strategy, your opinions are always the same as mine." Temujin smiled and patted him on the shoulder. "A 50 kilogram man can eat ten cows that weigh over ten thousand kilograms. He just won't do it in one day." The two men burst out in laughter.

Temujin settled back straight in his saddle and suddenly saw that Tolui's horse was rider-less. "Where's Tolui?" He shouted in fury.

Tolui was just nine years old, but Temujin had always been a harsh disciplinarian whether he was training troops or bringing up sons; he never showed mercy to anyone who violated his rules. With him shouting so loudly in anger, all the generals and troops immediately got a bad feeling in their stomachs. General Boroqul, Tolui's mentor, almost panicked and offered: "The kid has never overslept before, let me check."

Just as he turned his horse to gallop off to search for Tolui, he saw two kids come running up hand in hand. One of them, with a silk bandana on his head, was Tolui while the other turned out to be Guo Jing. Tolui ran straight towards his father and shouted: "Dad!"

"Where were you?" Temujin demanded in a harsh tone.

"Guo Jing and I just became andas down by the river. Look, this is what he gave me." Tolui replied, waving a red handkerchief with a flower embroidered on it in the air. It was something that Li Ping made for Guo Jing.

Reminded of the time he and Jamuka became andas as kids, Temujin's face immediately became calm. "What did you



give him?" He asked the two cute and innocent kids standing in front of him.

"This!" Guo Jing replied, pointing to the top of his head, where Temujin saw the golden necklace that his youngest son often wore.

"Now you two have to help and look after each other in the future, you hear?" Temujin said with a smile. Both of the kids nodded.

"Now get on your horses," Temujin ordered, "Guo Jing can come with us too." Ecstatic, Guo Jing and Tolui both mounted their horses.

After another period of waiting, the Wanyan brothers finally finished dressing and exited their gers. Wanyan Honglie, seeing the Mongolian soldiers were already in formation, immediately ordered his soldiers to fall in. However, Wanyan Hongxi, determined to put the Mongolians in their place, took his time slowly drinking several cups of wine and ate a little breakfast before finally climbing onto his horse. After another hour of general chaos, the ten thousand Jin troops were finally in formations.

The army marched northwards for six days before meeting up with Ong Khan's welcoming committee, comprised of Ong Khan's son Senggum and adopted son Jamuka. Upon hearing that Jamuka was here, Temujin immediately rode forth to meet him. The two men hopped off their horses and bear hugged each other. Every one of Temujin's sons rode forth to greeting their adopted uncle as well.

When Wanyan Honglie first laid eyes upon Jamuka, he saw a tall and skinny man with a few strands of gold in his mustache and a pair of eyes that were filled with energy and enthusiasm. He looked strong and spirited. Senggum, on the other hand, was fat and pale, probably from living in

luxury all of his life and not at all like someone who grew up on the Steppe. Not only that, he had an arrogant look on his face and seemingly ignored Temujin whenever he felt like it; a stark contrast to the warmth of Jamuka.

After another day of riding, they were very close to Ong Khan's encampment when two of Temujin's advanced scouts suddenly returned with news. "There are Naimans blocking the way ahead. About thirty thousand of them," they reported.

"What do they want?" Wanyan Hongxi asked, panicking a bit after hearing the news through his translator.

"From the looks of it, they want to fight," the scouts reported.

"They... they have.... they really have thirty thousand troops?" Wanyan Hongxi stuttered. "That... that's more than us... this... this...."

"Go and find out what's going on," Temujin ordered Muqali, not waiting for Wanyan Hongxi to finish his sentence.

Muqali headed off with ten bodyguards while the rest of them stopped and waited. Muqali returned not long after. "The Naimans said that since the great Jin princes granted a title to our Khan, they want to be granted a title too," he reported. "If not, then they say they will take Your Excellencies the princes as hostages until they too are granted titles from the Great Jin Empire. They also said that they want a title that's higher than our Khan Temujin's."

"Demanding titles by force? That... that's rebellion! What do we do?" Wanyan Hongxi's face went pale on hearing this news. Wanyan Honglie began organizing troops into fighting positions in case of any unexpected escalations.

"Brother, those Naimans frequently steal our livestock and cause trouble for us. Are we really going to let them get away with this?" Jamuka said to Temujin. "I don't know what the Jin princes would have us do?"

By now, Temujin had thoroughly surveyed the surrounding landscape and was confident of victory. "Let's show the Princes how the two of us do things around here!" He replied to Jamuka before letting out a howl and cracking his whip in the air twice, causing the five thousand Mongolian soldiers to simultaneously howl in response and startling the unprepared Wanyan brothers.

A cloud of dust had appeared ahead as the enemy slowly approached, forcing the advanced scouts to return. "Brother, order our boys to charge now!" Wanyan Hongxi said. "These Mongols are of no use now."

"Let them fight first," Wanyan Honglie whispered back.

Immediately understanding his brother's intentions, Wanyan Hongxi simply nodded and sat back. The Mongolian soldiers let out another loud shout, but did not move. "What on Earth are these Mongols doing shouting like rabid dogs?" Wanyan Hongxi frowned. "It's not like they are going to scare the enemy away no matter how loud they are."

On the left side of the formation was Boroqul. "Follow me and don't fall behind. See how we defeat our foes," he instructed Tolui, who, along with Guo Jing, were shouting at the top of their lungs just like the others.

In a heartbeat, the approaching army emerged out of the cloud of dust only a few paces away. Yet the Mongolians still did nothing but shout. This time it was Wanyan Honglie who got nervous, seeing how spirited the Naimans were.

Fearing his formation would be broken if they continued unimpeded, he ordered: "Fire arrows!"

The Jin army discharged several volleys, but because of the distance between the two armies, most of the arrows fell onto the ground before reaching the enemy. Frightened by the ferociousness showing on his enemies' faces as they gritted their teeth and charged at full speed, Wanyan Hongxi began to panic. "Why don't we just give them what they want; give them some bullshit title and be done with all this?" he turned around and suggested to Wanyan Honglie. "So what if the title is a little big? It's not like we are going to lose anything."

Suddenly, Temujin cracked his whip in the air several times. The Mongolian army immediately stopped shouting and split into two groups. Temujin and Jamuka, each leading a wing, immediately heading towards the high ground on either side. The two of them leaned down into their horses and galloped along with their troops, shouting out orders as they rode. The Mongolian troops split up into smaller and smaller groups so that, in a very short amount of time, they occupied the high ground in every direction. With the height advantage, the Mongols loaded arrows onto their bows and aimed at the opposing army, but not firing.

The leader of the Naimans, sensing that he was in a disadvantageous position, ordered his troops to head straight for the high ground. The Mongolian troops set up soft walls made of several layers of fleece to shield themselves from arrows. The bowmen shot from behind the walls as the troops stationed on nearby high ground fired arrows in support as well. With the enemy on either side of them, confusion descended upon the Naimans as they tried to attack both sides.

"Jelme, attack the rear!" Temujin shouted, seeing the opposing army had become disorganized from his position on the left.

With a huge saber in hand, Jelme led a group of one thousand soldiers down in a charge and cut off the enemy's retreat. Jebe, determined to slay the enemy general in order to show his gratitude to Temujin for sparing his life, was at the front of the charge with his spear sticking out in front of everyone. Being hit head on by a charge like this, the Naiman rear collapsed in chaos, and their forward units were shaken as well. The Naiman general was at a loss as to what to do next, when Jamuka and Senggum began to charge down from their positions as well. Attacked from both sides, the Naiman army completely collapsed before long. The leading general turned around and tried to escape, followed by several retainers as they headed back in the direction they had come from. Jelme didn't order a pursuit and let most of the opposing army go by. Only when there were about two thousand enemies left did he order his army to charge out and block their retreat. With nowhere to go, the brave Naiman soldiers that were left either fought to the death or laid down their weapons and surrendered. In this brief battle, the Mongols killed over a thousand foes and captured over two thousand while sustaining only a little over one hundred casualties.

Temujin ordered all captives be stripped of their armor and split into four equal groups, one for the Wanyan brothers, one for his adopted father Ong Khan, one for sworn brother Jamuka, and one for himself. All Mongolian families that had a relative die in the battle received five horses and five captives as slaves as compensation. Only now did Wanyan Hongxi finally calm down from his fright. "They want a title? Brother, why don't we give them the title of 'Ambassador of

the Defeated Losers?' Ha...ha!" He could not stop talking about the battle that just occurred.

The Mongolian victory, in spite of being outnumbered, made Wanyan Honglie even more nervous than he was before the battle. "At this moment, the only reason that our northern borders are safe is because the northern tribes are battling amongst themselves. If Temujin or Jamuka ever brought all the tribes on the Steppe under their rule, our Great Jin Empire would no longer have any peace." he thought to himself.

Other things troubled him as well. Even though his own troop of ten thousand did not enter into battle, their formation began to waver when the Naimans initially charged and there was fear on every one of their faces. The battle had not yet begun but the outcome had already been determined. Such courage and efficiency displayed by the Mongolians represented a huge threat in the future. He was still pondering things over in his mind when a cloud of dust appeared up ahead as another army approached.

# Chapter 4 - Twin Killers of the Dark Winds

Translated by Minglei Huang & Strunf



*Han Baoju let go of his whip and, with a flip, came tumbling down from the tree. Mei Chaofeng followed after him with the five fingers of her claw bearing down upon him. Han Baoju immediately threw his body forward to escape the attack. At the sametime, Nan Xiren and Quan Jinfa were letting loose a torrent of projectiles at their enemy from underneath the tree.*

“Alright, let's fight again!” Wanyan Hongxi proclaimed out loud.

Unexpectedly, the forward scouts came back with a different report. “The Ong Khan is here to personally welcome the two Jin Princes!” Temujin, Jamuka, and Senggum immediately rode forward to greet him.

From the dust clouds an army emerged. With several hundred personal guards with him, the Ong Khan rode up, rolled off of the back of his horse in one easy movement, then with his adopted sons Temujin and Jamuka at his side, approached and kneeled before the two princes. He was a rather chubby man with glittering silver hair. He wore a robe made of the finest black leopard furs that was held in place by a golden belt around his waist. The way he carried himself was one of great dignity and confidence. Wanyan Honglie hurriedly got off his own horse and returned the gesture, but Wanyan Hongxi remained on his horse and merely replied by cupping his fists.

“Your humble servant just heard the news of the Naimans' rudeness and was worried that Your Highnesses might have been disturbed. Your humble servant brought a force here as soon as possible. But fortunately, due to Your Highness's awe-inspiring presence, the three kids were able to defeat them.” The Ong Khan spoke.



Next, he took the lead and courteously led the Wanyan brothers all the way back to his own ger. The inside of his ger was covered with leopard and fox furs and well fitted with the finest furniture and wares. Even his personal guards were dressed in more luxurious clothing than those of Temujin's guard, not to mention Temujin and his son. The bellowing of horns continuously sounded for several kilometers surrounding the ger; men and horses bustled about, giving an atmosphere of something great going on. Never had the Wanyan brothers seen anything approaching such grandeur since they've been outside the Great Wall.

After the ceremony of bestowing the title was finished, everyone settled down. That night, Ong Khan held a huge banquet in the big ger to celebrate the arrival of the Wanyan brothers. Scores of female slaves danced for entertainment as the banquet progressed late into the night; it became quite lively, and was miles apart from the simple and slightly backwater reception they received from Temujin's tribe. Wanyan Hongxi was having one hell of a time; two female slaves had caught his fancy and he was pondering ideas in his head. It never occurred to him to talk to Ong Khan.

After about half of the koumiss had been consumed, Wanyan Honglie turned to the Ong Khan. "Your heroic deeds are known far and wide; even we who reside within the Great Wall have long admired your greatness. But I really want to meet some of the heroes of the younger generation of Mongolians." He said.

"Well, my two adopted sons just happen to be the two greatest heroes of Mongolia." The Ong Khan responded with a smile. Senggum, his own son who sat to one side, did not react well on hearing this and began downing one cup of koumiss after another.

"Your own son is another hero, why aren't mentioning him?" Wanyan Honglie asked, taking note of Senggum's displeasure.

"After I die, he will naturally take over my tribe." The Ong Khan smiled and replied. "But can he compare with his two adopted brothers? Jamuka is smart and intelligent. Temujin is even more brave and courageous; he started with nothing and made himself into what he is today with his own hands. What Mongol warrior wouldn't want to put his life in their hands and serve them?"

"Does that mean that the generals under hero Ong don't compare to Temujin Khan's generals?" Wanyan Honglie queried. Noticing that there was a hint of instigation in his words, Temujin shot a look towards Wanyan Honglie and mentally prepared himself for what might come next. The Ong Khan slowly stroked his beard and did not reply. Instead he took another gulp from his cup of koumiss.

"The last time, when the Naiman came and stole several thousand of my livestock, it was only because of Temujin and his 'Four Aces' that we were able to get the livestock back. Even though he doesn't have many men under him, each and every one of them is skilled and brave. Your Highnesses must have witnessed that first hand today." Senggum's face turned even angrier as he slammed the gold cup in his hand onto the table, causing a loud bang.

"What good am I really? What I have today is simply because of the attention and care that my adopted father showered on me." Temujin hurried to add.

"His 'Four Aces'? Who are they? I want to meet them." Wanyan Honglie changed the subject as well.

"Why don't you summon them inside?" The Ong Khan asked Temujin. Temujin lightly clapped his hands and four men

walked into the ger.

The first one looked gentle and scholarly with a white, clean face; he was the master of strategy, Muqali. The second man had a strong, sturdy build and his eyes were as piercing as an eagle's; he was none other than Temujin's good friend, Bogurchi. The third man was short but agile and his steps were light and swift; he was Tolui's master Boroqul. The last one's face and hands were covered with battle scars and his face was blood red; this was the man who had saved Temujin's life so many years ago, Tchila'un. The four of them were the founding generals in rise of Mongolia and were called the 'Four Aces' by Temujin.

After looking at them, Wanyan Honglie praised each one some what, and then awarded all of them with a big cup of koumiss.

"On the battle field today, there was a general with a black cape who led the charge through enemy formations, nobody could stop him; do you know who he was?" Wanyan Honglie inquired after the 'Four Aces' had finished their drinks.

"That's a Squad Leader that I just recruited," Temujin answered. "Everyone calls him Jebe."

"Then why don't we invite him in for a drink as well?" Wanyan Honglie suggested. Temujin turned and issued the command.

Jebe entered the ger and properly gave thanks for the reward of a drink. He was just about to drink when he was interrupted.

"How dare you, a measly Squad Leader, drink from my gold cup?" Senggum shouted. Jebe was shocked and furious, but stopped the cup as it came up to his lips. He looked over at

Temujin for the proper course of action. In Mongolian culture, stopping someone from drinking is an enormous insult. Not to mention that this was done in front of all these people, how could anyone bear such an insult?

“For my adopted father's sake, I'm going to let Senggum get away with this insult.” Temujin decided turning to Jebe.

“Bring it over here. I'm thirsty, let me drink it!” He took the cup from Jebe's hands and drank all of its contents in one gulp. Jebe shot an angry look towards Senggum, turned, and began to walk out of the ger.

“Come back here!” Senggum commanded fiercely, but Jebe just ignored him and walked out of the ger with his head held high.

“Even though Brother Temujin has his ‘Four Aces’, I have something that could defeat all four of them as soon as I let it loose.” Unhappy that things were not working out to his liking, Senggum changed the subject. He chuckled when he said that. Even though he called Temujin brother, he was not an anda of Temujin; he only did it because his father was Temujin's adopted father.

“Really? What could that be? What could be that powerful?” Wanyan Hongxi's interest was piqued by that statement.

“Well, we can go outside and I can show you.” Senggum said.

“We are having a good time drinking, what are you trying to stir up now?” Ong Khan objected.

“Just sitting here and drinking is getting boring, let's see something different.” Wanyan Hongxi very much wanted to see some trouble started, so much so that he had already

stood up by the time he finished his sentence and walked out. The others had no choice but to follow him.

The Mongolian troops had started several hundred camp fires and were celebrating beside them. When the Khans exited the ger, there was a huge rumble as the large section of troops to the west stood up immediately. They were lined up in perfect formation, not one of them was moving. They were none other than Temujin's troops. To the east, the Ong Khan's troops, slowly and disorganized, picked themselves up from the ground; there were even faint sounds of joking to be heard within their ranks.

"Even though the Ong Khan's troops are much more numerous, they can't compare with Temujin's troops!" Wanyan Honglie concluded upon seeing this display.

"Wine!" Temujin called. He had noticed, in the glow of the fire, that Jebe's face was still showing fury. So he ordered that a big jug of wine be brought to him.

"Today's tremendous victory over the Naiman was a result of everyone's hard work and dedication!" He loudly declared to everyone.

"It's because we were led by Ong Khan, Temujin Khan, and Jamuka!" All of the soldiers answered in one voice.

"Today, I saw someone who was especially brave, charging the enemy's rear no less than three times. He shot down several dozens of the enemy, who was he?" Temujin asked.

"Squad Leader Jebe!" The soldiers answered again.

"No, not Squad Leader, but Company Commander Jebe!" Temujin corrected. Everyone was momentarily taken aback before realizing what he meant and began to cheer.

“Jebe is a great warrior! He well deserves to become a Company Commander!” They all shouted with approval.

“Bring my helmet to me!” Temujin instructed Jelme. Soon Jelme returned with the helmet and presented it to him.

“This is the helmet that I wear onto the battle field! This is the helmet that I wear as I kill my enemies!” Temujin raised the helmet high above his head for everyone to see. “Now this will be a cup for a warrior to drink from!”

He opened the jug of koumiss and poured all of its contents into the helmet. Bringing it up to his lips, he took a huge gulp from the helmet, and then offered it to Jebe.

Overwhelmed with gratitude and with lowered head, Jebe knelt down on one knee to receive the helmet and finished the rest of the koumiss.

“Even the most precious diamond studded gold cup in the world cannot compare with my Khan's helmet.” He said in a low voice. Temujin smiled as he took his helmet back and put it back onto his head.

The Mongol troops had all caught word of how Jebe had been humiliated by Senggum and felt bad for him; even those troops under the Ong Khan had thought that Senggum was wrong in what he did. Now, seeing how Temujin treated him, they all burst out with a great cheer.

“What a man among men this Temujin is! At this moment Jebe would gladly die one thousand times for him!” Wanyan Honglie thought to himself. “Back in the Imperial Court all the officials insisted that the north is populated by brainless barbarians; it's obvious that they have grossly underestimated these people.” But Wanyan Hongxi was only concerned with finding out what was that thing that Senggum claimed could defeat all four of the ‘Aces’.

“So what is it that you have that's so powerful that it could defeat all four of the ‘Aces’?” he said, as he casually sat back down onto the tiger-fur covered chair that his personal servants had carried out.

“I invite Your Highness to get ready to see something very special. ‘Four Aces’ my foot; they probably won't even measure up to those two bastards of mine.” Senggum quietly said with a smile before turning around to the troops and loudly asked. “Where are my Brother Temujin's ‘Four Aces’?”

The four men came walking up and saluted their superiors. Senggum turned and whispered something to the trusted servant at his side who nodded before running off. Soon after, the sound of roaring beasts could be heard as a pair of huge golden leopards came gracefully out from behind the ger. As they slowly approached in the darkness, the leopard eyes glowed like a pair of jade lanterns. This gave Wanyan Hongxi quite a fright as he immediately gripped the handle of his saber tightly. Only when the leopards walked close to one of bonfires did he see that, in fact, there was a leash and collar around their necks and each leopard had a big fellow on the other end of the leash. Both had a long stick in their other hand, and, as it turned out, they were specially charged with raising and taking care of the leopards. Mongolians love raising leopards for hunting purposes. Not only do leopards run faster than hunting dogs, they are especially feisty; being caught by the leopard means instant death for whatever they are set upon. The only draw back was that the leopards consumed a great deal of food; so only royalty or top officials could afford to keep leopards. Although the leopards were restrained by men, they were still snarling and clawing while glaring viciously at everyone. The muscles on their bodies looked as if they contained boundless energy within them, ready to

explode at any moment. Wanyan Hongxi felt his heart get a little fluttery and he was exceedingly uncomfortable. From the power and might that these two leopards were showing, it looked as if they could easily break out of the grip of their masters should they choose.

“Brother, if those ‘Four Aces’ of yours are truly great warriors and can subdue these two leopards of mine bare handed; then I’ll be truly convinced.” Senggum said, turning towards Temujin.

The ‘Four Aces’ were furious as the same thought ran through their minds. “You humiliated Jebe, now you are going to humiliate us? Are we just game? Are we wild wolves? Why should we fight your leopards?”

Temujin was far from happy about this whole proposal as well. “I love my men like my own life, how can I let them fight a leopard?”

“Is that so?” Senggum burst out with a loud laugh. “Then why claim to be ‘Four Aces’ or whatever you want to call them. They’re not even brave enough to fight my leopards!”

Of the ‘Four Aces’, Tchila’un’s temper was the shortest and he could not stand such an insult any longer. He took a huge step forward. “My great Khan, it doesn’t matter if they laugh at us, but we cannot allow you to be shamed.” He said to Temujin. “I’ll fight the leopards!”

Wanyan Hongxi was ecstatic to hear this. So much so that he removed a bright red ruby-studded ring from his finger and tossed it on the ground, proclaiming, “If you can beat the leopard, then that’s yours.”

Tchila’un did not even give the ring a look before lunging forward, only to be held back by Muqali. “Our names are known throughout the Steppe because we have defeated so



many foes. Can a leopard command an army? Can a leopard ambush or surround enemies?" Muqali reasoned loudly.

"Brother Senggum, you win." Temujin said as he bent down, picked up the ring, and placed it in Senggum's hand. Senggum immediately put the ring on one of his fingers and let out a triumphant laugh as he raised his hand to show off his newly won ring. Ong Khan's troops began to cheer in response. Jamuka stayed silent throughout but was frowning heavily. Temujin kept a calm expression on his face. The 'Four Aces' bitterly retreated back to their ranks. Disappointed and terribly unhappy about not seeing a man versus leopard fight, Wanyan Hongxi asked Ong Khan for two female slaves and retired to his own ger.

Next morning, Tolui and Guo Jing ran off to play. Hand in hand, they made their way far from the main camp. Suddenly a white rabbit ran by right in front of them. Tolui brought up his little bow and arrow, aimed, shot, and hit the rabbit squarely in the belly. Because he was so young the arrow lacked power, so even though it was a direct hit, it was not immediately fatal and the rabbit scuttled off screeching with the arrow imbedded in it. The two little kids, screaming at the top of their lungs, chased after the rabbit.

After running for quite a while, the rabbit finally collapsed. The two kids let out a simultaneous cheer and were just about to retrieve the rabbit when seven or eight kids suddenly came pouring out from the woods from one side. One particular kid, who was of about 12 years or so, was quick to recognize the situation and grabbed the rabbit. He pulled the arrow from the rabbit's belly, threw it on the ground, shot a fierce look in Tolui and Guo Jing's direction, before stomping off with the rabbit.

“Hey, I shot that rabbit, why are you taking it?” Tolui shouted. The kid whirled around and came back.

“Who says that you shot it?” He laughed.

“Well, this arrow is mine isn't it?”

The older kid's eyebrows suddenly rose and his eyes bulged out. “This rabbit was my pet, you are lucky I'm not asking you to pay for it!” He shouted back.

“You are lying, this is obviously a wild rabbit.” Tolui shot back.

The kid became even angrier and he walked up and shoved Tolui. “Watch out who you are accusing! My grandpa is the Ong Khan, my dad is Senggum; do you know that? Even if you did shoot this rabbit, I'm taking it anyway; what can you do?”

“My dad is Temujin!” Tolui proudly answered.

“Pei! So what if he's Temujin? Your dad's a coward! He's scared of my grandpa and scared of my dad!” The kid's name was Dukhsh and he was Senggum's only son. After having a daughter, Senggum had to wait several years before finally having a son; after him he had no other offspring. He had always spoiled his son, letting him bully as he pleased. Temujin, Ong Khan, and Senggum had not met for a long time; even though their sons had met before, this was, for all practical purposes, their first true meeting.

Hearing someone make fun of his father, Tolui was filled with anger and proudly shouted back: “Says who? My dad's not afraid of anybody!”

“When your mom was kidnapped, it was my grandpa and my dad who went and took her back for your dad. You think I didn't know that? So what's the big deal if I just take this

measly little rabbit of yours?" Even in the past, Senggum was envious of Temujin's fame. When they helped Temujin that one time, Senggum made sure to tell everyone about it; even his son had heard it many times.

Temujin had always viewed that event as an incredible embarrassment for himself, he naturally never told Tolui about it. Hearing this at this moment, Tolui was so mad that his face turned purple. "You're a liar! I'm going to tell my dad!" He angrily threatened before turning around and walking off.

"Your dad's afraid of my dad, so what if you tell him?" Dukhsh laughed at Tolui. "Last night, when my dad brought out his two leopards, your dad's 'Four Asses' were so afraid they couldn't even move!"

Of the 'Four Aces', Boroqul was Tolui's master. Hearing this only made Tolui even angrier. So angry he could barely speak. "My master isn't even afraid of tigers, why would he be afraid of leopards? He just didn't want to fight wild animals." He finally stuttered out.

Dukhsh took a step forward and suddenly slapped Tolui squarely on his face. "How dare you talk back to me? Aren't you afraid of me?" He yelled. Tolui was startled as his cheeks instantly turned blood red. He wanted to cry, but would not let himself.

Guo Jing had been seething on the side all this time, but now he could no longer hold back. He suddenly lunged forward and rammed his head squarely into Dukhsh's stomach. This caught him by surprise and knocked him flat on his back.

"Yay!" Tolui clapped for joy for a moment before grabbing Guo Jing's hand and trying to run away.

"Kill those two boys!" Dukhsh screamed, still on the ground. Dukhsh's companions ran up to the two boys and a fierce fight quickly broke out. Dukhsh picked himself up from the ground and angrily charged into the fray. Dukhsh's gang was older than the boys to begin with and also outnumbered them; they were able to pin down Tolui and Guo Jing very quickly.

"Give up? Give up?" Dukhsh shouted as he continually rained punches onto Guo Jing's back. Guo Jing tried with all his might to get back up, but was weighed down by his foe's weight. At his side, Tolui was also being ganged up on by two kids.

It was at this precarious moment that the sound of horse bells could be heard coming from just over a sand dune as a small group of riders appeared. The leading rider was a short, fat fellow riding on a yellow horse. Seeing the kids fighting in the distance, he let out a little laugh.

"Hah, fighting!" Only when he rode closer for a better look did he realize that it was seven kids bullying two much smaller kids. They'd pinned them down on the ground and were beating them. The two smaller kids' faces were already full of bruises.

"Shame on you; let them go!" He shouted.

"Piss off!" Dukhsh shouted back. "Do you know who I am? I'll beat up whoever I want to, and you can't do anything about it!" His father was one of the most powerful men in the North, so he was used to bullying everyone and nobody dared to challenge him.

"How dare you act like that? Let go of them!" The rider on the yellow horse yelled back. By this time, the rest of his group had joined him.

"Third Brother, stop meddling in affairs that don't concern us, let's go." There was a woman in that group.

"Look at them, what kind of fighting is this?" The rider on the yellow horse replied.

These riders were the Seven Freaks of the South. They had followed Duan Tiande all the way north onto the Steppe before losing his trail. These past six years, they had roamed up and down the Steppe in search of Duan Tiande and Li Ping. All seven of them had actually learned Mongolian by this time, but they still could not find any clues as to the whereabouts of Li Ping. The Seven Freaks were all stubborn characters, and very competitive as well, so even if faced with ordeals ten times more difficult and more dangerous than this, they would not concede this bet to Qiu Chuji. Without ever conferring, the seven of them had the same plan, even if they never find Li Ping, they would still search until the eighteen years was up. At that time they would go to Pavilion of the Drunken Immortal in Jiaxing and admit defeat to Qiu Chuji's face. Besides, Qiu Chuji might not find Yang Tiexin's widow either. If neither side could find their widow, then a tie would result and then maybe another challenge would be issued.

"Two against one, we can't allow that." Han Xiaoying hopped off of her horse and pulled the two kids that were sitting on Tolui's back off of him. Suddenly realizing that all the weight was off of his back Tolui struggled to get up. Dukhsh paused for a moment and Guo Jing took advantage; he flipped his body violently and crawled out from between Dukhsh's legs. The two, having finally freed themselves, immediately tried to run away.

"Go after them!" Dukhsh yelled as he led the rest of his gang in hot pursuit.

Seeing these little Mongolian kids fight reminded the Seven Freaks of all the misadventures that they had together when they were little, causing them to smile quite fondly at the memories.

"It's time to go. Let's get to the market ahead before it disperses, or else we will miss a chance to ask the people there!" Ke Zhen'E suggested. By this time, Dukhsh's little gang had caught up to Tolui and Guo Jing once again and surrounded them.

"Do you give up?" Dukhsh demanded. Tolui, still looking very angry, did not reply but instead fiercely shook his head.

"Well you asked for it!" The kids converged upon one another yet again.

Suddenly there was a cold flash as a little dagger suddenly materialized in Guo Jing's hand. "You want some of this?"

Li Ping, out of love for her son, had already given him the dagger, that her husband left her, to carry around. She felt that this object was good for warding off evil and had intended that this dagger protect her son from evil spirits. Because of the bullying Guo Jing was receiving, he pulled it out.

Seeing that he had a weapon with him, none of Dukhsh's gang was brave enough to challenge him.

'Magical Hands Scholar' Zhu Cong was already on his way when a sudden flash caught his eyes. The way the dagger reflected the sunlight lit up his heart.

"This reflection is incredibly strong; I've got to see what this precious little toy is." Having stolen from government treasuries and rich gentry's vaults all his life, he was quite an expert at discerning precious objects. He immediately

pulled his horse around and saw that one of the kids had a dagger in his hand. The dagger reflected a blue light that flickered endlessly, obviously an extremely rare weapon. But how did it end up in the hands of a little kid? Looking over the kids again, he noticed that other than Guo Jing, all the other kids were wearing expensive shirts made of leopard skins. But Guo Jing made up for it by having a golden crown-looking ring on top of his head. Obviously the kids were all members of wealthy and influential Mongol families.

"The kid probably stole his father's favorite knife to play with. Stealing from kings and aristocrats won't cause too much harm." Once he made up his mind, he jumped off of his horse and smiled sweetly as he approached the kids.

"Come on everyone, stop fighting. Play nice." As he was talking, he suddenly flashed into the circle of kids and grabbed the knife. Having devoted an incredible amount of training to capturing weapons with bare hands, only the best martial arts masters could hope to stop him from taking their weapons, never mind a small kid like Guo Jing.

As soon as the dagger was in his hand, Zhu Cong immediately scuttled out of the circle and hopped onto his horse. With a jerk of the reins, he laughingly galloped off and caught up to the rest of his group.

"Well, today wasn't a total loss; I ended up with this little gem." He laughed quite heartily at his success.

"Second Brother, you won't ever get rid of that stealing habit of yours will you?" 'Smiling Buddha' Zhang Ahsheng joined in on the laughter.

"What little gem? Let me see it." 'Hidden Hero of the Bustling City' Quan Jinfa, being a merchant by trade, was curious. With a flick of his arm, Zhu Cong tossed the dagger

over. A streak of blue shot across the sky in the sunlight; the light from the dagger wavered, looking as if a small rainbow had just materialized, causing everyone present to shout in praise.

“Excellent!” Quan Jinfa involuntarily yelled as the dagger flew towards his face, sending a shiver down his spine. He reached out and caught the dagger by the handle. He “tch”ed endlessly in admiration as he examined the dagger. When his attention moved to the handle, he saw the characters ‘Yang Kang’ carved onto it. “This is a Han name! How did this dagger end up here in Mongolia?” A question shot through his mind. “Yang Kang, Yang Kang? I have never heard of a hero named Yang Kang. If he isn't a martial arts hero, why would he have such an exceptional weapon?”

“Big Brother! Do you know who Yang Kang is?” He called out.

“Yang Kang?” Ke Zhen'E searched through his memory for a while and shook his head. “I have never heard of him before.”

‘Yang Kang’ was the name that Qiu Chuji had given to the baby that was still inside of Bao Xiruo. The two fathers had exchanged daggers and that was how Li Ping ended up with the dagger that had ‘Yang Kang’ carved on it. Of course, the Seven Freaks did not know of this matter. Of the seven, Ke Zhen'E was the oldest as well as the most knowledgeable. If he did not know, then there was no way that the other six did.

“Qiu Chuji is searching for Yang Tiexin's widow, could this Yang Kang have something to do with Yang Tiexin?” Quan Jinfa's attention to detail made him ask.



“Well, if we find Yang Tiexin's widow, we would still have one-upped that Bull Nose.” Zhu Cong joked. But having searched endlessly and fruitlessly for the past six years, this seemingly remote and completely unrelated lead was something that none of them were willing to let slip by.

“Let's go back and ask that kid.” Han Xiaoying concluded.

Han Baoju's horse was the fastest, so he arrived back where the kids were first, only to discover that the kids were at it again. Tolui and Guo Jing were, once again, pinned down to the ground. Han Baoju ordered the kids to break it up, but none of them heeded his words. Getting impatient, he grabbed a couple of kids and threw them off to the side.

“You two dogs come back tomorrow and we'll fight again!” Dukhsh threatened Tolui, because he was too scared to carry on fighting.

“OK...tomorrow!” Tolui shouted back as Dukhsh led his gang away. He already had plans for what to do; he would go and ask his third brother Ogedai for help as soon as he got back. Of all his brothers, Ogedai was the nicest to him, and strong as well. He would surely help if asked.

“Give it back!” Despite having his face covered with blood from his nose, Guo Jing put his hand out to Zhu Cong.

“Sure, no problem,” Zhu Cong waved the dagger back and forth in front of Guo Jing's face. “But you have to tell me where you got this dagger.”

“My mom gave it to me.” Guo Jing answered, wiping blood away from his still bleeding nose with a sleeve.

“What's your dad's name?” Guo Jing never had a father and was caught speechless by the question. All he could do was

shake his head.

"Is your surname Yang?" Quan Jinfa asked. Once again, Guo Jing shook his head. Seeing that this kid was rather slow, the Seven Freaks were quite disappointed.

"Who's Yang Kang?" Zhu Cong probed further. Guo Jing still only shook his head. The Seven Freaks had always valued their integrity above all else, so they always kept their word, even to a kid. Zhu Cong handed the dagger back to Guo Jing.

"You can go home now." Han Xiaoying took out a handkerchief and wiped off the blood from Guo Jing's face as she tenderly told him. "Don't fight anymore. You are still small, you can't beat them yet."

Afterwards, the seven of them climbed back onto their horses and began to leave. Guo Jing just stood there, watching them ride off to the East.

"Guo Jing, let's go back." Tului suggested.

The Seven Freaks were already quite a distance away, but Ke Zhen'E's hearing was incredibly sensitive. When he heard the name 'Guo Jing', his entire body shook violently; he immediately jerked his horse around and rode back to the kids.

"Boy, your surname is Guo? You are Han Chinese and not Mongolian, right?" He anxiously asked.

Guo Jing grunted an assertion, sending Ke Zhen'E's mind into the clouds with joy. "Who is your mother?" He hurriedly asked.

"Mom is mom." Guo Jing answered, making Ke Zhen'E scratch his head for a bit. "Can you take me to your mother?"

"My mom's not here."

"Sister, you ask him." Ke Zhen'E suggested, realizing that there was some hostility in Guo Jing's responses. Han Xiaoying hopped off of her horse and walked up to Guo Jing.

"Where's your father?" She asked in a warm voice.

"My dad was killed by bad people; when I grow up, I'm going to kill them and avenge my father."

"What was your father's name?" Han Xiaoying was so excited that her voice was trembling. But Guo Jing just shook his head.

"Who killed your father?" Ke Zhen'E asked.

"His... his name is Duan Tiande!" Guo Jing could barely contain his anger as he said that name.

Because Li Ping knew that in such a desolate and remote place as the Steppe, any moment could bring with it many dangers. She knew that her chances of ever returning to China were nearly non-existent. If something should happen to her suddenly, her son would never know the name of his mortal enemy, and that would not do. She had long ago told her son, over and over again, the name and appearance of Duan Tiande. She was an illiterate farm girl and had always called her husband 'Xiao-Ge'. She had heard other people call him 'Brother Guo' but had never cared about what her husband's real name was. This was why Guo Jing had only ever known his father to be his 'dad' and did not know that he had other names.

'Duan Tiande'. That name did not come out of Guo Jing's mouth very loudly, but when the Seven Freaks heard it, the shock rendered them speechless. Even if three bolts of lightning suddenly struck beside them on this clear and

sunny day it would not have shocked them as much. In the blink of an eye, it felt as if the earth beneath them shook, as if the wind and air around them became colored. Only after a very prolonged silence did Han Xiaoying suddenly let out an ecstatic shout. At the same time, Zhang Ahsheng was beating his fists onto his chest like a mad man. Quan Jinfa had thrown his arm tightly around Nan Xiren's neck and Han Baoju was doing back flips on his horse's saddle. Ke Zhen'E reared his head back and laughed crazily, while Zhu Cong was spinning like a top. Seeing them act like this, Tolui and Guo Jing could not decide whether they were funny or just plain crazy. Only after a long time did the Seven Freaks finally, slowly, calm down, but their faces were filled with joy.

"Merciful Bodhisattva, thank you, thank you!" Zhang Ahsheng knelt down and prayed.

"Little brother, let's sit down and talk." Han Xiaoying said to Guo Jing. Anxious to get back and ask his brother Ogedai for help as well as having a bad feeling about these seven strangers with their strange accents and even stranger behavior, Tolui did not want to stay any longer. Even though these same strangers had just helped them in a fight, Tolui incessantly urged Guo Jing to start heading back.

"I need to go now." Guo Jing finally relented and began to walk away hand in hand with Tolui.

"Hey...hey! You can't go now. Let that little friend of yours go back by himself." Han Baoju almost panicked and yelled at the top of his lungs.

The two little kids were scared of the man's ugly complexion and immediately started to run as soon as he began to yell. Han Baoju chased them and was just about to

grab the back of Guo Jing's neck with his fat hands when Zhu Cong cut him off.

"Third Brother, don't be so rude." Zhu Cong lightly parried Han Baoju's hand and stopped it in mid-move, much to Han Baoju's surprise. Picking up a little speed, Zhu Cong quickly got in front of the two little kids.

"I'm going to do some magic, you guys just watch, ok?" He smiled at the kids as he picked up three stones. Guo Jing and Tolui's curiosity was immediately piqued and both of them stopped and watched him. Zhu Cong held his right hand out for all to see and placed the stones in the middle of his hand.

"Gone!" He shouted as he balled his hand into a fist. When he opened his hand again, the stones were gone, shocking the little kids.

"Get in there!" Zhu Cong pointed at the old hat that was on top of his head before taking it off. The stones were sitting right in the middle of the hat. Guo Jing and Tolui let out a loud cheer and applauded with joy.

At this moment, a flock of wild geese flew toward them in a spear formation. This gave Zhu Cong an idea.

"Now we'll let my Big Brother show you a trick." He fished out a handkerchief, handed it to Tolui, and pointed at Ke Zhen'E. "Put this blindfold on him."

"Is it hide and go seek?" Tolui hopefully wondered out loud as he put the blindfold on Ke Zhen'E.

"No. He will shoot a wild goose out of the sky while blindfolded." Zhu Cong answered as he produced a bow and an arrow.

"How could he? I don't believe you." Tolui concluded.

While the conversation was going on, the wild geese flew straight overhead. Zhu Cong flicked his arm and tossed the three stones in his hand up at the geese. Because of his powerful hands, the stones shot up and startled the geese, causing the lead goose to honk several times as he readied to lead the formation in a different direction. But Ke Zhen'E had already determined its location, drew his bow to the fullest, and let loose. He hit the goose squarely in the belly and the goose, with the arrow still in it, tumbled down onto the ground.

Tolui and Guo Jing exploded with another cheer. They ran off to retrieve the goose and brought it back to Ke Zhen'E, their young hearts filled with admiration.

"Remember how the eight boys ganged up on you two earlier? Well, if you know some martial arts, then you wouldn't have to worry about there being more than one of them." Zhu Cong told the kids.

"We will fight some more tomorrow and I'm going to get my older brother to help." Tolui told him.

"Get help from your older brother! Hmph, that's something that useless kids do. I'll teach you a couple of moves that I guarantee will help you win tomorrow." Zhu Cong replied.

"You mean the two of us beating the eight of them?" Tolui asked.

"Yes!"

"Yay! Come on, teach me!" Tolui was greatly excited at the prospect of beating Dukhsh.

"How about you, don't you want to learn too?" Zhu Cong asked him. He'd noticed that Guo Jing was standing to the side, seemingly uninterested.

"Mom told me that I shouldn't fight others; if I learn how to fight, then my mom will be unhappy."

"Little chicken!" Han Baoju lightly berated him.

"If that's true, why were you in a fight just now?" Zhu Cong asked again.

"Because they started it."

"So what are you going to do when you see your enemy, Duan Tiande?" Ke Zhen'E asked in a heavy tone.

"I'll kill him to avenge my father!" Just hearing that name made a fiery glare flash from Guo Jing's young eyes.

"Your father was an expert in martial arts yet was still killed by him; how could you kill him if you don't know any martial arts? How can you get your revenge then?" Ke Zhen'E rendered Guo Jing speechless with those questions.

"See? You have to learn some martial arts." Han Xiaoying concluded for him.

"See that peak over there?" Zhu Cong pointed at a deserted mountain top to his left. "If you want to learn martial arts and get your revenge then come to the top of that mountain tonight at midnight. But you have to come by yourself. Besides this little friend of yours, you can't let anybody else find out about it. Brave enough to do it; afraid of ghosts?"

Guo Jing was still stupidly standing there, but Tolui was getting impatient.

“Come on, teach me, please!”

Zhu Cong suddenly grabbed his wrist, hooked his left foot behind him, and gently tripped him, sending Tolui onto the ground.

“Why did you trip me?” Tolui angrily demanded once he got back up off the ground.

“That was martial arts, did you learn it?” Zhu Cong smiled as he answered. As it turned out, Tolui was quite smart and understood right away. He mimicked Zhu Cong and showed the move against an imaginary foe.

“Teach me something else.” He said to Zhu Cong. Zhu Cong faked a punch toward Tolui's face. Tolui dodged to the left, but Zhu Cong's right fist was waiting there for him. This punch had no force behind it and stopped the moment it touched Tolui's nose.

“Yay! Teach me something else!” Tolui was ecstatic. Zhu Cong suddenly braced himself and gently bumped his shoulders squarely into the little kid's stomach; sending him flying off. Quan Jinfa jumped up, caught him in mid air, and gently put him back onto the ground.

“Mister, teach me something else!”

“If you master those three moves, most adults won't be able to beat you, enough is enough.” Zhu Cong smiled and told him before turning towards Guo Jing. “Did you get them?”

Guo Jing was still dumbstruck and not really thinking of anything as he absent mindedly shook his head. When compared to the smart and intelligent Tolui, Guo Jing seemed incredibly stupid and slow to the Seven Freaks, who were very disappointed at this turn of events. Han Xiaoying let out a long sigh and her eyes reddened.



"I say that we stop wasting energy and just take the mother and son back south and hand them over to Qiu Chuji. As for the competition, let's just admit defeat." Quan Jinfa observed.

"This kid's make up is just too hopeless; he's not the kungfu practicing type." Zhu Cong agreed.

"There isn't a bit of fight in him; I don't see how it's going to work either." Han Baoju also agreed and the Seven Freaks began discussing the matter amongst themselves in their Southern dialects.

"You two can go home now." Han Xiaoying waved at the two little kids. Tolui grabbed hold of Guo Jing's hand and they happily skipped off.

Having searched for six long and hard years all over the boundless Steppe, the Seven Freaks were joyous beyond description when they finally found Guo Jing. As it turned out, the joy was only temporary; when they discovered that the kid was so dumb that it would be incredibly difficult for him to ever amount to much as a martial artist. They could not help feeling defeated. This set back could only be matched by the one they would experience had they, in fact, never found Guo Jing. Han Baoju, whip in hand, was relentlessly beating the ground, trying to vent his frustration and nobody could get him to stop. All this time, only the Wood Chopper of the Southern Mountains, Nan Xiren, remained silent.

"Well, what do you think, Fourth Brother?" Ke Zhen'E asked.

"Very good." Nan Xiren replied.

"What's very good?" Zhu Cong inquired.

"The kid's very good," he added.

"Fourth Brother always acts as if speaking costs him money." Han Xiaoying said, letting the frustration get to her. "He will never say a word more than he has to."

"I was also very dumb as a kid." Nan Xiren gently smiled. He was always very quiet and every word that he spoke had already been carefully thought over, meaning that he was rarely wrong. Hearing him, the other six Freaks found a glimmer of hope and instantly became more confident.

"Right...that's right! Since when have I been smart?" Zhang Ahsheng agreed, looking in Han Xiaoying's direction.

"Let's wait and see if he's got the guts to come tonight." Zhu Cong suggested.

"I say most likely not." Quan Jinfa replied. "I'm going to go find where he lives first." He jumped off of his horse and trailed far behind Tolui and Guo Jing until he saw them walking into their own gers.

That night, the Seven Freaks waited on the deserted mountain top. It was fifteen minutes to ten and the Big Dipper had noticeably changed its position, but Guo Jing was nowhere to be seen.

Han Baoju sighed, "The Seven Freaks of the South never lost to anyone in our lives. But in the end, we lose to that Taoist priest."

Zhu Cong said, "The Quanzhen Sect is fighting the Jurchens in the north and helping the poor Chinese citizens there. Everything the sect does is chivalrous and admirable. The Seven Masters of Quanzhen are great martial arts experts and honorable individuals, Qiu Chuji is even said to be the most exceptional one of the Seven Masters. Losing to him

won't damage our good name. Furthermore, we are trying to save the lives of survivors of an honorable man, which is a good deed. When people in Wulin learn of this, they can only praise us and say: "Well done!" The other six Freaks agreed and felt better.

Looking to the west, dark clouds were gathering on top of each other off on the horizon. But above their heads not a cloud could be seen in the dark blue sky. The winds were swirling around them from the northwest; sometimes it would gust, other times it would be still. In the middle of the sky hung the bright moon, but a faint yellow ring could be discerned around it.

"Looks like there's going to be a storm tonight." Han Xiaoying observed. "The kid is not going to come."

"Then let's go to him tomorrow morning." Zhang Ahsheng replied.

"Being a little slow is not a big problem. But if this kid is afraid of the dark... Ay!" Ke Zhen'E sighed and shook his head.

The seven of them were just wandering around when Han Baoju suddenly spotted something in a bush. "Hey what's that?" He pointed at three piles of white objects that looked awfully strange in the moon light.

Quan Jinfa walked over to investigate only to discover that they were human skulls placed neatly in three piles.

"It must have been those little kids that piled up the skulls like that." He laughed before suddenly noticing something else. "What...Second brother, come quickly!"

The sudden change in the tone of his voice was easily noticeable and unsettling for everyone. Other than Ke

Zhen'E, the other Freaks made their way over to him.

"Look at this!" Quan Jinfa picked up one particular skull and handed it over to Zhu Cong. When Zhu Cong inspected the skull closely, he noticed that on the dome of the skull there were five holes positioned as though they were made by fingers. He tried with his own hand and the five holes were positioned properly for his fingers. The hole for his thumb was a little bigger than the others, while the hole for his pinky was a little smaller. It seemed as if somebody had carefully carved the holes into the skull to match a particular hand. Obviously it was not a child's toy that the little kids had left here. Zhu Cong's expression changed dramatically. He bent over and picked up two more skulls and discovered that they also had these holes in them.

"Could somebody have made these holes with their fingers?" He wondered. But there had not been anybody in the world with martial arts skills so powerful as to be able to smash holes through bone just using fingers. With this realization, he was rendered silent and awestruck.

"Could it be some man eating beast or monster that lives around here?" Han Xiaoying said, almost yelling.

"That's right, it must be a monster." Han Baoju concurred.

"But if it is some beast, then why would it or could it put the skulls in such neat piles?" Quan Jinfa asked, deep in thought.

"How are they placed?" Ke Zhen'E said, after making his way over to them.

"In a three pyramid formation; every pile consists of nine skulls." Quan Jinfa answered.

"Are they stacked in three layers, with five skulls on the bottom layer, three in the middle layer, and one on the top?"

"Yes!" Quan Jinfa was shocked. "Big Brother, how did you know that?"

"Go one hundred steps northeast and northwest and tell me what you see!" Ke Zhen'E did not answer his question but instead, anxiously directed them.

His demeanor was one of extreme anxiety, almost bordering panic. This was so different from his normal calm steadiness that the other Freaks did not dare waste one second and in threes, they headed off in the two directions. Soon, Han Xiaoying, who went to the northeast, and Quan Jinfa, who went to the northwest, yelled out at the same instant.

"There are skull piles here too!"

"This is a matter of life and death!" Ke Zhen'E literally flew over to the pile of skulls at the northwest and forcefully, but quietly ordered. "Don't raise your voice, no matter what!"

The three Freaks were quite taken aback by his words and weren't quite sure what to make of them. Ke Zhen'E quickly made his way to Han Xiaoying's group to the northeast and told them the same thing.

"Is it monsters or mortal enemies?" Zhang Ahsheng asked, with a hushed voice.

"They are mortal enemies of mine. They are formidable experts and they killed my brother." By this time the Freaks in the other group had made their way over as well. Hearing his words, all of the Freaks were quite surprised.

The six knew that Ke Zhen'E's brother, Ke Pixie had higher skills than Ke Zhen'E and was also a very intelligent and cautious man. His killer must have been a lethal nemesis.

The Seven Freaks talked about everything with each other and about two years ago they learned of the death of Ke Pixie. But Ke Zhen'E never revealed how his brother died or who was responsible.

Ke Zhen'E picked up a skull and ran his hands over it inspecting it. After finding the holes he took his right hand and tried out the holes with his fingers. "They did it. They did it. They actually mastered it." He mumbled to himself before turning to the other Freaks. "There are three piles here as well?"

"Yes!" Han Xiaoying answered.

"Are there eight skulls in every pile?" Ke Zhen'E inquired.

"One pile has nine; the other two piles have eight." Han Xiaoying again answered.

"Go and count the other groups as well." Han Xiaoying swiftly ran over to the other group and then returned just as quickly. "There's a pile of seven over there; they are all decapitated heads and the flesh has not decomposed yet."

"Then that means they will be here very soon." Ke Zhen'E concluded quietly and handed the skull over to Quan Jinfa. "Carefully return this to where it was, and don't leave any trace of our presence."

Quan Jinfa quickly placed everything back in their original positions and returned to Ke Zhen'E. All of their eyes were upon Ke Zhen'E as they quietly waited for his explanation.

"It's Copper Corpse and Iron Corpse!" Ke Zhen'E looked as if he was looking up at the sky and his face twitched continuously.

"But aren't they dead? Can they still be alive?" This news shocked Zhu Cong tremendously.

"I thought they were dead as well. But it turns out that they have been hiding here training their 'Nine Yin White Bone Claws'," Ke Zhen'E said. "Brothers, quickly mount your horses and ride south as fast as you can and don't come back! Wait for me after you have gone five thousand li. Wait for ten days. If I don't show up on the tenth day, then you need not wait any longer."

"What are you saying Big Brother?" Han Xiaoying anxiously asked. "We have all tasted each other's blood when we swore to live and die together! Why are you telling us to leave now?"

"Go! Leave!" Ke Zhen'E repeatedly waved his hand. "You don't have any time to waste!"

"What do you take us for; a bunch of heartless bastards?" Han Baoju angrily rebuked.

"If the seven of us lose, then we'll just end our lives together. That's what we have always said." Zhang Ahsheng said, voicing his objection. "Since when have we ever run away?"

"These two possess incredible martial skills. Now that they've mastered the 'Nine Yin White Bone Claws', the seven of us are definitely no match for them. Why stay here and waste your life for no reason?" Ke Zhen'E protested.

The other Freaks knew how proud Ke Zhen'E was and that he would never admit defeat. Even when facing a master like Qiu Chuji he would still throw caution to the winds and fight with abandon. To hear him talk about these two people like this, it could be inferred that their power was something beyond comprehension.

"In that case, let's leave together!" Quan Jinfa proposed.

"They condemned me to a life of suffering; but that I can deal with." Ke Zhen'E coldly replied. "However, I have to avenge what they did to my brother!"

"Share the blessings, share the hardships!" Nan Xiren declared. He never says much, but he need say nothing more.

Ke Zhen'E thought about it. He knew that his sworn brothers and sister were people who valued honor and would never consider running to save their own lives. The words he just said were based on his worry for their lives and he now realized that they bordered on being offensive to them. With this thought, he sighed. "Alright, if that's the case, then please be careful," he said. "'Copper Corpse' is a man, 'Iron Corpse' is a woman and they are husband and wife. They are called the 'Twin Killers of the Dark Winds'. About two years ago, the two of them were just starting to train the 'Nine Yin White Bone Claws'. They killed a lot of innocent people. My brother was invited to join an expedition against them, so he sent someone to inform and invite me to join the expedition. However, at that time the seven of us were in Shandong and Hebei provinces looking for Li Ping. We'd just found some clues about her whereabouts. It seems that some years back someone saw a military commander and a pregnant woman in man's clothes shouting and screaming in the streets. That woman was seemingly mad and shouted that she wanted to kill that commander for killing her husband. They were on their way north, so it must have been Li Ping and Duan Tiande. I couldn't just leave and join the expedition, especially since we'd finally found some clues about where Li Ping went. When we were up north, we lost track of Li Ping and Duan Tiande. It was years later before we found out that Li Ping was in Mongolia and had given birth to Guo Jing. Last year in the spring, a messenger came to tell me that my brother



had been killed in the expedition against the 'Twin Killers of the Dark Winds'. It was also that messenger who informed who the 'Twin Killers' were and where they came from and what styles of martial arts they practised. I knew that I would be unable to avenge my brother then and decided not to tell you and we continued our search for Guo Jing."

Ke Zhen'E looked very serious now and said, "What all of you need to watch out for is those claws of theirs. Sixth brother, go one hundred steps to the south and see if there's a coffin there."

Quan Jinfa, as quickly as he could, counted his steps. When he made it to one hundred, he did not spot a coffin. But upon closer inspection, he suddenly noticed that there was a corner of a stone slab protruding out of the ground. He pulled on it, but the stone slab did not budge. So he turned around and waved his arms; soon the other Freaks joined him. Zhang Ahsheng and Han Baoju both got down and, together, could barely lift the stone slab. In the moonlight, they were able to see that there was a grave hidden beneath the stone slab. In the grave lay two bodies, both of them dressed in Mongolian attire.

"Those two monsters will come soon and use these corpses for practice." Ke Zhen'E hopped into the grave. "I'll hide here and ambush them. You hide yourselves around here and make sure that they don't find you. Once you hear that I have began fighting with them, attack at once and try to catch them off guard. Please don't hold anything back. This type of ambush might not be righteous, but our foe is too powerful this time. Ambush is the only way; otherwise, none of us may make it out of this alive." The other six Freaks listened intently to his every word.

"They are also extremely attentive and intelligent. They will spot even the slightest trace of disturbance from far away."

Ke Zhen'E continued. "Put the stone slab back and just leave a small slit for me."

The six Freaks nodded and gently placed the slab back where it had been. Afterwards, they grabbed their weapons and hid inside bushes and behind trees in the area immediately surrounding the grave.

Seeing Ke Zhen'E worry like she had never seen before, Han Xiaoying was worried as well as curious. When she looked for a hiding spot she made sure to find one close to Zhu Cong.

"Who are 'Copper Corpse' and 'Iron Corpse'?" She asked him as quietly as she could.

Zhu Cong answered, "Two years ago, Master Ke Pixie sent a messenger to contact big brother. Big brother was afraid the news would leak out and asked me to go with him to talk to that messenger. He also wanted my opinion as to whether that messenger was real or was trying to deceive him. According to that messenger, 'Copper Corpse' and 'Iron Corpse' are disciples of the lord of the Peach Blossom Island in the Eastern Sea...."

Han Xiaoying softly interrupted, "Disciples of Peach Blossom Island? That makes them people from Zhejiang province, just like us."

Zhu Cong nodded and said, "Yes, it is said that they were disowned by the Lord of the Peach Blossom Island. They are highly skilled and very vicious; they are also very secretive and cautious. After they killed Ke Pixie and some others of the expedition, they suddenly disappeared. Everyone thought that they'd paid for their crimes and were killed somehow. Little did we know that they were hiding here in Mongolia."

“What are their real names?” Han Xiaoying asked.

“‘Copper Corpse’ is a man; his name is Chen Xuanfeng. He has a burnt yellow complexion like copper, and never showed a bit of emotion on his face, like a corpse. That's why everyone referred to him as ‘Copper Corpse’.”

“So does that woman, ‘Iron Corpse’, have a dark complexion?”

“Yes, her surname is Mei, full name Mei Chaofeng.”

“Big Brother said that they were training something called the ‘Nine Yin White Bone Claws’. What kind of kungfu is that?”

“I haven't heard of it either.”

Han Xiaoying looked over at a pile of skulls near her and saw that top skull was positioned in such a way that the holes where the eyes were faced directly at her, as if it was staring at her. She shuddered involuntarily and turned away, not daring to take another look.

“How come Big Brother never brought this up?” She asked. “Could it be....”

She had not finished when Zhu Cong suddenly covered her mouth with his left hand and pointed to the bottom of the hill with his right hand. Han Xiaoying followed his finger and looked out from behind the bush. In the moonlight near the horizon, a faint black shadow could be seen quickly approaching at incredible speed.

“I should be ashamed!” Han Xiaoying reprimanded herself. “I was too busy talking to Second Brother and did not watch for the enemy.”

In a blink of an eye, the black shadow had made it to the foot of the hill. By now they could discern that it was actually two figures, which was why it looked so broad from afar.

“The ‘Twin Killers of the Dark Winds’ truly do have a bizarre kungfu.” The Six Freaks thought to themselves. “Running at that speed yet they were still able to stick together so closely to each other; it really is as if they are inseparable!”

The six of them held their breath and cowered even lower, quietly waiting for them to come up the hill. Zhu Cong clutched tightly to his pressure point hitting fan. Han Xiaoying quietly buried the blade of her sword in the dirt so as to avoid giving herself away because of reflections off the blade; nevertheless, her right hand held a tight grip on the handle.

The sounds of sand and rocks being kicked could be heard as feet traveled up the hill. Each and everyone’s hearts pounded with every step and each moment seemed to last an eternity. By this time, the northwest wind had picked up as well. The dark clouds to the west looked like individual mountain tops as they came rolling relentlessly in.

A few moments later, the sound of footsteps ceased. On the open space, on the top of the hill, two silhouettes could be seen. The first, immobile, with a leather hat on its head, looked like a Mongol; the second, with long hair floating with the wind, was visibly a woman.

“Here are ‘Copper Corpse’ and ‘Iron Corpse’,” thought Han Xiaoying. “Let’s see how they train themselves.” They saw the woman slowly move around the man, and heard her joints crack quietly. Then she accelerated and the crackling became drum-like; increasingly loud and closer together.

"Is her internal strength truly that strong?" Han Xiaoying wondered. "It's not surprising that Older Brother acts so prudently!" The woman moved her hands back and forth and, each time, the joints in her arms crackled. Her long hair was streaming nearly horizontally from the speed, and it gave her a terrifying presence.

Han Xiaoying felt a chill in her heart and the hairs began to bristle on her body. Suddenly, the woman raised her right palm and struck the man's chest with her left palm.

"This is strange", the six thought, "could it be that her husband's body is capable of resisting her palm strokes?" The man fell backwards, but she had already sped behind him and hit his back. Going back and forth at high-speed, she hit him with eight palm strokes, each time quicker, and each time more powerful. The man didn't make a sound. After the ninth stroke, she suddenly leaped very high, then, coming down like an arrow, raised the man's leather hat and planted the five fingers of her right hand in his head!

Han Xiaoying fought back a scream. The woman dropped to her feet and exploded with laughter. The man, who had collapsed on the ground, didn't move. She stretched her hand, spotted with blood and brain matter, and examined it in the moonlight still laughing. She turned her head, and Han Xiaoying saw that her face, although a little dark skinned, was rather pretty and she seemed to be about forty years old.

The six now understood that the man was not her husband, but had been captured as a living target for the purpose of her practice. The woman must be 'Iron Corpse', Mei Chaofeng.

She stopped laughing, stretched out her hands and tore at the dead man's clothing. In the north, where the weather

was extremely cold, everyone wore thick leather coats. Yet she tore these very resistant clothes as if they were paper, without any effort. Then she plunged her hand into the poor wretch's chest and withdrew the internal organs one by one, which she examined attentively in the moonlight. Afterwards she threw them on the ground. Even from a distance, the six could see that all the organs, heart, lungs, liver, spleen, had been completely destroyed. They now understood the intent of this practice: she had hit the body of this man with nine palm strokes and had succeeded in smashing the internal organs without breaking the bones of the skeleton. By examining the damaged internal organs, she could see the progression of her strength.

Very angry, Han Xiaoying wanted to attack immediately. She raised her sword ready to attack, but Zhu Cong silently restrained her.

"For the moment," the 'Magical Hands Scholar' thought, "'Iron Corpse' is alone. Although she seems dangerous, the seven of us should be able to make an end of her. If we get rid of her first, it will be easier to take care of 'Copper Corpse' later. We would be absolutely incapable of facing the two of them at the same time... But 'Copper Corpse' might be hidden, ready to fall on us unexpectedly. Older Brother knows well the habits of these two monsters; it's better to follow his instructions and wait for him to launch the first attack..."

After inspecting the internal organs, Mei Chaofeng seemed satisfied. With a smile on her lips, she sat down cross-legged facing the moon, and began to practice the regulation of breathing. With her back turned to Han Xiaoying and Zhu Cong, they could see her shoulders rising and falling as she inhaled and exhaled.

"If I use the stroke 'The Lightning Illuminates the Big Sky'," Han Xiaoying considered, "I am nearly certain I'll be able to pierce her right through. But if I miss my stroke, our entire plan will be compromised!" She was unable to decide what to do and her body trembled.

Zhu Cong didn't dare move either; he felt a trickling sensation down his back as he broke out in a cold sweat. Raising his eyes, he noticed that the black clouds coming from the west had covered half the sky, like a sheet of rice paper that someone had spilled ink on. Inside the dark clouds lightning flashed, increasing the anguish and fear in the hearts of the Six Freaks. The thunder roared dully, as if it was suppressed by the thickness of the clouds.

After practicing the breathing exercises for a period of time, Mei Chaofeng arose; then she dragged the dead man behind her towards the grave where Ke Zhen'E was hidden. She bent down to raise the stone slab. The six Freaks tightened their grip on their weapons, ready to attack her as soon as the slab was removed.

Mei Chaofeng, hearing a rustle of leaves that didn't seem caused by the wind, turned her head suddenly and saw a human shape at the top of a tree. Releasing a long scream, she leaped in that direction.

The man hidden in the tree was Han Baoju. Taking advantage of his small size, he had hidden himself perfectly in the foliage, but, as he got ready to jump, he made a slight move which alerted Mei Chaofeng. Her leap at him came with irresistible force! Han delivered a stroke 'The Black Dragon Inhales Water', slashing down with his whip at Mei's wrist. The woman, contrary to all expectations, did not try to avoid the stroke, but instead seized the tip of the whip. Han Baoju, who was very strong, pulled her quickly toward him. This was to her benefit since it brought her

nearer and she counterattacked with a lightning palm. Han Baoju felt the power of that stroke arriving and, knowing that he could not resist it, released his weapon and somersaulted down from the tree. 'Iron Corpse' didn't let him escape and followed right behind him, aiming her claw-like hands at the small man's back.

He seemed to feel an icy breath on the nape of his neck and made an extraordinary effort to move faster. At the same time, Nan Xiren and Quan Jinfu, hidden at the bottom of the tree, threw their nearly invisible projectiles at the pursuer. A 'Piercing Bone' awl came from the first and a dart [fei biao] hidden in the sleeve from the second. She swept them away with a flick of her left hand, while her right hand tore off a piece of clothing from the back of Han Baoju. The small man touched the ground with his left foot and rebounded away immediately. However Mei, as agile as wind, was already in front of him.

"Who are you?" She shouted. "What did you come here to do?" At the same time, she planted ten fingers in his shoulders. Han felt the lightning flash of pain, as if ten iron awls had suddenly pierced his flesh. He sent a kick toward 'Iron Corpse's' stomach that she avoided while delivering a stroke with her right hand, nearly breaking his ankle. Barely escaping from her, he threw himself to the ground and rolled to clear himself.

As Mei was about to trample him, a heavy black rod struck her foot; it was Nan Xiren, the 'Wood Chopper of the Southern Mountains'.

Abandoning Han, Mei Chaofeng quickly moved back to avoid the rod. In an instant, she found herself surrounded by enemies. A scholarly looking man, holding an iron fan, tried to hit the vital points on her meridians; while a girl handling a sword attacked from the right.



A big strong paunchy man armed with a large knife and a small skinny fellow with a weird weapon came from her left; facing her was a vigorous looking peasant-type moving his iron rod. The sound of footsteps behind her had come from the man with the whip. All these people were completely unknown to her, yet they seemed to be eminent experts in martial arts.

"They are too numerous," Mei Chaofeng thought, "It will be necessary to use strong methods and eliminate some of them without delay. No matter what their names or their origins... Aside from my beloved master and my bastard of a husband, I will kill anyone in this lowly world!" She jumped, all claw-like fingers extended, at Han Xiaoying. Seeing the power of this attack, Zhu Cong, fearing for her, jumped forward pointing his iron fan at her vital point 'Sinuous Pond' situated in the hollow of her elbow. However, it didn't seem to bother her. She stretched out her right hand while Han Xiaoying defended herself with the stroke 'White Mist on the Stream', with the intention of hitting her arm. But 'Iron Corpse' turned her wrist, trying to catch the sword with her bare hand, as if she didn't fear the blade. Han Xiaoying was afraid of this and moved back. At this moment, the fan of the Scholar accurately hit her 'Sinuous Pond' accupoint. This is a very important vital point on the human body and Mei's arm should have been paralyzed immediately. Zhu Cong was delighted at having succeeded with his stroke until he saw her arm suddenly move down and her dangerous nails were practically on his head! He moved back at the last moment and escaped death by a hair!

"Doesn't she have any vital points?" he wondered, surprised and afraid. Han Baoju had collected his whip by now, and the Six, moving their weapons, surrounded Mei Chaofeng. However, she didn't seem at all impressed. Her bare hands,

with which she tried to seize their weapons, appeared as efficient as claws made out of steel. The Freaks were particularly worried since it seemed that their adversary's nickname was not exaggerated. 'Iron Corpse' appeared to have, effectively, a body of iron! She had just received two strokes on the back, inflicted by the weighing scales of Quan Jinfa, without apparently causing her any injury. They knew that she had succeeded in pushing the resistance of her body to an extreme. Apart the sharpened tip of Zhang Ahsheng's large knife and the sword of Han Xiaoying, she seemed to not fear any of the other weapons. She didn't even try to avoid them! Her only desire was to attack.

She increased speed and seized Quan Jinfa's arm who was too slow trying to escape. The other five moved quickly, but were too late; Mei, with a violent stroke, pulled a piece of flesh from his arm.

"All those that practice the iron body technique," Zhu Cong thought, "must possess a nodal practice location which is impossible for them to protect using this technique. This point is particularly vulnerable and a small touch is sufficient to severely wound or kill them... Where could this shrew's nodal location be?" He bounded to the right, to the left, moving the fan, trying successively to touch the meridian point 'Meeting of the Hundred' on the top of the head, the point 'Screen of the Spring' on the throat, then the point 'Tomb of the Mind' in the hollow of the navel, followed by the point 'Hollow of the Middle' on her back... He tried about ten points, all the while thinking that, if she takes particular care to defend a point...that will be her nodal location.

The significance of his back and forth movements didn't escape Mei Chaofeng. "Lowly 'Scholar'," she shouted, "my

technique is perfect to the point that I don't have a nodal location!"

She struck and seized Zhu's wrist. Although surprised, this man fortunately had a quick mind and agile hands. Before Mei could plant her nails in his flesh, he had pulled back his wrist and slipped his fan into his adversary's hand while whispering, "Careful, there's poison on the fan!"

Suddenly feeling a hard object in her hand, Mei Chaofeng, speechless and afraid of the poison, threw the fan to the ground.

Zhu Cong used this opportunity to escape and move several steps back. He looked at his hand, the back of which showed five bloody grooves, and felt a flush of cold sweat. The fight had only lasted a short time and not only had the Freaks not finished her off, but three of their number were already wounded. If 'Copper Corpse' arrived, they would all lose their lives. Zhang Ahsheng, Han Baoju and Quan Jinfa were already quite tired and covered with sweat. Only Nan Xiren, whose neigong was more powerful, and Han Xiaoying, lighter bodied, didn't seem tired; whereas their enemy became more and more violent. Zhu Cong suddenly saw, in the pallid gleam of the moon, the three heaps of skulls on the left. He shivered, and then had an idea; he hurried towards the hole where Ke Zhen'E was hidden, while shouting. "Run for your lives!" The other understood and moved back while still fighting.

"Bastard children from nowhere," Mei Chaofeng sneered, "you wanted to trap me here, but now it is too late to run away!" She rushed after them. Nan Xiren, Quan Jinfa and Han Xiaoying did their best to engage her, while the three others united their strength to raise the slab of stone. It was just in time, because Mei Chaofeng had seized Nan

Xiren's iron rod and was moving her claws in direction of his eyes.

"Come quickly and help us", Zhu Cong shouted. He pointed his finger upward and made gestures with his other hand, as if calling for the help of someone hidden on the heights. Surprised, Mei Chaofeng couldn't stop herself from raising her eyes; but all she saw were the low clouds veiling half the moon... There was no one up there!

"Seven steps right!" Zhu Cong shouted. At these words, Ke Zhen'E threw six poisoned projectiles seven steps to his right, two at head height, two to the middle and two below, while bounding out of the hole. The other Freaks attacked from all sides at the same time. Mei Chaofeng let out a shriek of pain; two projectiles had reached her eyes! Fortunately for her, her agility allowed her to move her head back immediately, so that the invisible projectiles didn't penetrate into her brain, but she had definitely been blinded!

Feeling pain and rage, she struck downward with her two palms; but Ke Zhen'E had already escaped to one side. They heard two thuds, because her palms had hit a rock. Made even more furious, she sent out a kick that struck the slab and made it fly off. The Seven, afraid of the strength of her attacks, remained carefully to the side.

Since she couldn't see them any longer, she thrashed out with her senses, striking, scratching, and kicking. She looked like a furious tiger, or a demon, breaking everything in her path, while raising clouds of dust, breaking the branches of the trees, all without hurting any of her enemies, who were sufficiently far away, holding their breath. Later, her vision became completely dark, and she knew that the poison had taken effect. "Who did this?" she

said with a terrifying voice. "Say it quickly, so that I die knowing who killed me..."

Zhu Cong made a gesture in direction of Ke Zhen'E to ask him to be quiet and to let Mei die in ignorance. Then he remembered that his Older Brother was blind, how could he have seen his gesture?

"Mei Chaofeng." Ke said with an icy voice, "Do you remember 'Divine Dragon Soaring through the Sky,' Ke Pixie, and 'Bat Soaring Through the Heavens,' Ke Zhen'E?"

Mei Chaofeng responded with a thunderous and terrifying laugh. "So Old Bastard, you didn't die! You're the one that used the poisonous projectiles, aren't you? Have you come to avenge 'Divine Dragon Soaring Through the Sky's' death?"

"Precisely! Since you haven't died yet...that suits me well!"

Mei sighed and stayed silent.

The Seven Freaks remained on guard. At that moment, the moon was nearly hidden by the dark clouds, and everyone felt the insidious and penetrating cold. Mei Chaofeng stood immobile like a stone statue, her hands alongside her body, and the moon light reflecting off her sharp nails. The strong wind that blew from behind her raised her long hair. Han Xiaoying, who was in front of her, saw blood oozing from her eyes. Suddenly, Zhu Cong and Quan Jinfa shouted at the same time, "She attacks, Older Brother!"

As their voices resounded again, Ke Zhen'E sensed a hit was about to arrive on his chest. He bounded into the air by delivering a heavy stroke to the ground with his staff, and landed on top of a tree that was behind him. The blow delivered by 'Iron Corpse' missed its target; instead, she planted her ten fingers in the trunk of the tree. The Six

Freak's faces were pale with terror. Had Ke Zhen'E lingered for only one second, the nails would be planted in his body. How would he have been able to escape alive?

Having missed her adversary, Mei Chaofeng released a sudden long and weird howl, very piercing, but with a power that carried far.

"How unfortunate", Zhu Cong thought, "she calls her husband 'Copper Corpse' for help." Quickly, he shouted, "It is time to finish her!"

He mobilized all his energy into his arm and heavily hit Mei Chaofeng's back, while Zhang Ahsheng raised a big stone which he brought down at her head.

'Iron Corpse', who had just lost her vision, didn't yet know how to protect herself by using her hearing, like Ke Zhen'E. The big stone, while coming down, made a noise that she could hear and she quickly avoided it. But she could not avoid Zhu Cong's stroke. Even though she had trained her body for extreme resistance to accupoint strikes, the 'Scholar' not only had quick hands but also strong ones; she felt a stabbing pain in her back.

Zhu Cong wanted to take advantage of his position and continued to hit her, but Mei Chaofeng counter-attacked with a slash of her claws, and he moved back.

Just as the other Freaks got ready to step in, they heard a long howl coming from far away. It had the same tonal quality that Mei had used a while ago, and it gave them the creeps. Shortly, a second howl was heard, but this time a lot nearer.

"That person moves quickly," the Seven thought, alarmed.

"Be careful, that is 'Copper Corpse'!" Ke Zhen'E shouted.

Han Xiaoying ran over and looked down the hill; she saw a shadow approaching at a quick pace, howling. Mei Chaofeng had adopted a defensive stance, no longer attacking. She concentrated her internal energy to arrest the progress of the poison in her body, while waiting for her husband's arrival to help destroy the enemy.

Zhu Cong made a sign to Quan Jinfa and the two men hid themselves in the brush. 'Iron Corpse' was dangerous by herself, but from the speed of 'Copper Corpse', Zhu Cong suspected that he could be even stronger than his wife. It was obviously impossible to defeat them when they were together. On the other hand, a chance existed if they took them by ruse.

Suddenly, Han Xiaoying uttered a shriek of surprise; she saw, in front of the running shadow, another smaller silhouette that was also climbing the hill. This silhouette moved more slowly, and, because it was small, no one had seen it before. She watched more attentively and saw that it was a child, Guo Jing certainly. Surprised and delighted, she hastened to meet him.

She was not very far from him and the downward slope was easy to descend, but 'Copper Corpse', a remarkable expert in lightness kung fu, was gaining on him quickly. Han Xiaoying hesitated: "I am not skilled enough to face 'Copper Corpse'... But the child is going to fall into his hands, how can I not help?" She accelerated and shouted, "Quickly, child, run faster!"

Seeing her, Guo Jing uttered a yell of joy, unconscious of the imminent danger that threatened him.

For years, Zhang Ahsheng had been secretly in love with Han Xiaoying, but never dared express his feelings towards

her. Seeing her running into terrifying danger, he feared for her safety and sprang forward to catch up and protect her.

On top of the hill, the other Freaks had stopped attacking Mei and observed the slope of the hill, keeping their invisible projectiles concealed, ready to intervene.

In the blink of an eye, Han Xiaoying reached Guo Jing; she took his small hand and turned on her heels to run back with him. They had hardly started, when she felt Guo Jing's hand slip from her grip. The child uttered a loud scream; Chen Xuanfeng had grabbed him from behind. Han Xiaoying turned around with an agile move and, using the sword stroke 'The Phoenix Nods its Head', feinted towards the enemy's left armpit; then, moving to the side, raised the tip of the sword for a quick and precise thrust, aimed at his eyes. It was the very essence of the sophisticated technique of 'The Sword of the Yue Maiden'.

Chen Xuanfeng took the child under his left arm, parried the stroke with his right, deflecting the blade. He followed with the palm stroke 'To Push the Skiff while Following the Current'. The young woman retracted her weapon and moved away. But the arm of Chen Xuanfeng suddenly seemed to lengthen by half a foot. Han Xiaoying, who originally had the impression that she was outside of his range, was reached and struck on the shoulder. She fell to the ground.

This exchange took place in a flash. The merciless 'Copper Corpse' followed with a stroke of his claws directly at the top of Han Xiaoying's head. The 'Nine Yin White Bone Claws' was a dangerous and cruel technique which destroyed flesh and broke bones. The stroke could not fail to penetrate the skull of the young woman. Zhang Ahsheng was some steps away and understood the danger; without thinking about his own safety, he threw himself on top of



her, protecting her with his body. The claw fell, and the five fingers of 'Copper Corpse' penetrated the 'Smiling Dhuda's' back. Zhang Ahsheng let out a terrifying howl and tried to reach his enemy's chest with his large knife. Chen Xuanfeng defended against it, causing the weapon to drop. 'Copper Corpse' returned with another palm against Zhang as he lay on the ground. Frightened, the other Freaks shouted as they hurried to their rescue.

"My 'Shrew'," shouted Chen Xuanfeng, "what happened here?"

"They destroyed my eyes!" Mei Chaofeng replied with anger while leaning against a tree. "If you let one of them escape, my 'Bastard' husband, you will deal with me!"

"No worries, my 'Shrew'," Chen Xuanfeng shouted, "Not one will escape alive. You... Are you hurt? Don't move..."

'Copper Corpse' slammed down his hand again at the head of Han Xiaoying. Han used the move 'A Lazy Duncie makes a Somersault', and she escaped rolling.

"Do you believe you will be able to escape me?" mocked Chen, raising his left hand.

Zhang Ahsheng, severely wounded and confused, saw that his beloved was in danger of being killed. Mobilizing every last bit of strength, he sent a kick toward the enemy's hand. Chen planted his fingers in Zhang's leg. Zhang, goaded by the pain, straightened up and wrapped his arms around his aggressor. Chen caught him by the neck, wanting to throw him far away, but the 'Smiling Dhuda', fearing still that he would hurt Han Xiaoying, stubbornly refused to release him. 'Copper Corpse' gave him a violent blow to the head that stunned him. The butcher fainted, and his grip relaxed.

The intervention of Zhang had given the young woman enough time for her to jump to her feet and take the fight to Chen. She didn't dare approach him closely and was content to whirl around the enemy using her lightness technique.

"Fifth brother," she shouted, "how do you feel?" She had made two whirls round Chen, when the others arrived and joined in. Zhu Cong and Quan Jinfa immediately threw their invisible projectiles.

'Copper Corpse' was surprised to see so many enemies of this strength. "We are in the middle of the deserted steppe," he thought, "where did these expert fighters come from? My 'Shrew'," he shouted, "these skilled people, who are they?"

It's the members of the 'Bat Soaring Through the Heaven's' group. The leader is the brother of 'Divine Dragon Soaring through the Sky'.

"Good, a group of bastards we've never met. Never mind, we will kill them anyway!"

Fearful of his wife's injury, he shouted, "And you my 'Shrew', are you seriously wounded? Tell me at least that it doesn't threaten your life?"

"Hurry up and slaughter them", Mei Chaofeng shouted furiously. "I am not dead yet..."

Seeing his wife leaning on the tree and not coming to lend him assistance, Chen understood then that, in spite of her usual stubbornness, she was seriously injured. Worried, he hoped to eliminate the enemy as soon as possible and take care of her. At this moment, five Freaks were surrounding him; only Ke Zhen'E remained aside ready to intervene at any time.

Chen Xuanfeng threw Guo Jing to the ground and sent a punch in the direction of Quan Jinfa. Quan, worried about the child, ducked to avoid the stroke and used this chance to snatch up Guo Jing. A somersault got them out of the enemy's range. This movement, named 'The Mischievous Cat Catches the Mouse', is used to avoid and save at the same time. It had been executed with agility and precision. Even Chen Xuanfeng was in awe of his move.

'Copper Corpse' was cruel by nature; the stronger his adversaries were, the more he wanted to make them die with atrocious suffering. Because they had injured his beloved wife he wanted it even more. The 'Twin Killers of the Dark Winds' had, for a long time, trained in two dangerous techniques; the 'Nine Yin White Bone Claws' and the 'Heart Breaker' palm. He had now mastered them to eight or nine tenths of their power. With a terrifying howl, he attacked his enemies without worrying about his own safety, attacking with deadly strokes every time.

The five knew that their lives were at stake at this precise moment and didn't take his attacks lightly. They mobilized all their strength to defend themselves. But they could not approach the enemy too closely since he was so dangerous.

Han Baoju decided to attack, using the technique 'Whip at the Even Soil', rolling on the ground and delivering whip strokes from all sides at Chen Xuanfeng's legs. Chen, troubled by this unexpected attack, received a stroke on the back from Nan Xiren's stick that made him utter a scream of pain. He turned around and stretched his claws towards the 'Wood Chopper'.

Nan didn't have the time to retract his stick for defense because he sensed the claws coming at him. He fell backwards to escape. Then he heard popping sounds coming from the joints of 'Copper Corpse', whose arm

suddenly stretched out an extra several inches. His hand was against the 'Wood Chopper's forehead. In a fight between experts, the murderous strokes were often avoided by one or two inches. Nan Xiren had thought that the extension of his adversary's arm had reached its extreme, yet it had stretched still farther! How would the 'Wood Chopper' escape this stroke? He soon felt the tips of Chen's nails on his forehead...

In panic, he raised his left arm and seized the enemy's wrist with a 'Catch and Control' technique, trying to block it. At that moment, Zhu Cong jumped on the back of 'Copper Corpse' and jammed his forearm onto the adversary's throat in order to strangle him. By doing that, he fully exposed his own chest, but to save the life of his sworn brother, he didn't worry about breaking the elementary precautionary rules of fighting.

At this moment, when the lives of the fighters were held by a thread, thunder sounded and the clouds covered the moon completely. It was total darkness; a person couldn't even see the fingers of his own hands and a heavy rain started to fall.

They heard the sound of two crunches and a plunk. Chen Xuanfeng had just broken the left arm of Nan Xiren and, at the same time, had given a stroke from his elbow to Zhu Cong's chest. Zhu Cong felt a terrible pain that forced him to stop the pressure on his enemy's neck and fall backwards. 'Copper Corpse', close to suffocating, stood to one side catching his breath.

"Move back everyone," Han Baoju shouted in the blackness. "Seventh sister, how do you feel?"

"Silence!" replied Han Xiaoying while moving several steps.

Astonished by the sounds of the movements made by his friends, Ke Zhen'E asked, "Second brother, what's happened?"

"The darkness is total," Quan Jinfa answered, "no one can see anything!"

'So the Heavens come to help us," Ke Zhen'E thought, delighted.

The Seven Freaks, three of whom were severely injured, were thinking that they had just lost the first part; but now dark clouds had covered the sky and it was raining heavily. Each of them kept their breathing silent and no one dared move. The extremely fine hearing of Ke Zhen'E allowed him to recognize that the breathless man that was standing seven or eight steps away from him, on the left, was not one of his brothers. He immediately threw six poisoned projectiles in that direction.

Chen Xuanfeng sensed the arrival of the invisible projectiles and jumped into air. He was indeed very strong and because of it, he succeeded in avoiding all six while at the same time, determined their source. Without making a sound, he suddenly leapt, all claws extended, toward Ke Zhen'E. Ke heard him, briskly moved to the side, and attacked with a stroke from his staff. For him, there was no difference between day and night. Since Chen Xuanfeng couldn't see anything, his power was greatly impaired. The two men were now on an equal footing. After about ten exchanges, 'Copper Corpse' had the impression that his enemy was attacking from all directions, without knowing for sure if his own strokes were directed in the proper direction. It was like living in a nightmare.

Slowly probing around, Han Baoju, Han Xiaoying and Quan Jinfa were trying to help their injured brothers. The fate of

Ke Zhen'E also preoccupied them, but they weren't able to help him in this darkness. Amid the sound of the rain, they heard the hisses produced by the hands of Chen Xuanfeng and the staff of Ke Zhen'E. The two fighters had hardly exchanged thirty strokes, but, to the other Freaks, it seemed to last for an eternity. Suddenly, they heard two strokes, and 'Copper Corpse' started screaming in pain; he had been struck by the staff. The Freaks were delighted just as lightning flashed in the sky, illuminating the summit of the hill.

"Watch out, Older Brother!" Quan Jinfa shouted.

Chen Xuanfeng had benefited from this instant of vision to orient himself. He advanced, concentrating his energy in his left shoulder and suffered, without flinching, the staff's strokes. He then seized it with his left hand and his right hand grabbed at the blind man's chest. Ke Zhen'E, surprised, released his staff and leaped backwards. 'Copper Corpse' wasn't going to let such a great opportunity pass; the claw that had already torn his adversary's garment, turned suddenly into a fist. Without a single movement of his body, Chen's arm stretched and delivered a stroke loaded with internal energy, to the blind man's chest and he was propelled violently backward. At the same time, he threw the blind man's staff like a javelin. All these gestures were executed with smooth continuity; 'Copper Corpse' was very proud of it and issued a long howl of joy, accompanied by thunderous growls.

During another lightning flash that illuminated the area briefly, Han Baoju saw the staff flying towards his older Brother. Conscious of the danger, he lashed his 'Golden Dragon' whip, causing it to wrap around the projectile and make it fall.

"Now," Chen exclaimed, running towards him, "I'm going to take your dog life!" Carried away by his impetus, he stumbled on something that felt like a body; he bent over and grabbed it. It was a small boy, Guo Jing.

"Let me go!" the child shouted.

Then a new lightning flash illuminated the area. Guo Jing saw the face of the man that held him in air, a sallow face with a menacing look. He was so frightened that, instinctively, he drew his dagger and plunged it into the man's body, right in the middle of the navel, until he could push it no further.

Chen Xuanfeng let out a terrifying howl and fell backward. In the technique that he used to make his body invincible to the strokes, the vulnerable nodal location he'd chosen was situated precisely in his navel. Even though Guo Jing's dagger had an extremely sharp blade, even a simple knife, if it struck this place, would have been fatal to him. This was the reason that, during a fight, he took every precaution to protect this part of his body. When he seized the child, he didn't feel that he was a danger to him. After having caught him on the flank of the hill a little while ago, he knew that the youngster surely didn't know any martial arts. However, as the proverb says, "It is the good swimmer who drowns, and it is on flat land that the cart reverses itself". Who would have predicted that this dangerous expert was going to lose his life at the hand of a small, weak and ignorant boy!

After fatally injuring 'Copper Corpse', Guo Jing remained petrified, standing still without knowing what to do. He seemed on the verge of crying, but didn't dare let himself go.

Hearing her husband's long scream, Mei Chaofeng hurried, stumbled, fell and crawled to reach him. "My dear brother," she shouted, "how are you?"

"It is done, my little...sister", he mumbled, "hurry, flee... before you..."

"I am going to avenge you", she croaked.

"I will miss you, my little sis....little sister. I...I cannot take care of you anymore....." and with those last words Chen Xuanfeng died.

"Good brother... I will miss you too! Don't leave me!"

Han Baoju, Han Xiaoying and Quan Jinfa, taking advantage of the first glow of the pre-dawn, rushed to the attack.

Mei Chaofeng had not only lost her vision, but she felt her head spinning from the poison's effects. While training in the 'Nine Yin White Bone Claws' the spouses had, for about ten years, absorbed arsenic acid in small quantities regularly. They neutralized the toxic effects with their internal energy. Using this dangerous method was the only way that Chen Xuanfeng had found to increase their internal and external strength. With time, Mei had been partially immunized against poison; otherwise the poisoned projectiles of Ke Zhen'E would have killed her long ago.

She defended herself so ferociously that the Freaks didn't even manage to reach her and were repeatedly put in danger. Han Baoju was beginning to get angry. He thought to himself, "If we can't manage to overcome her on a three against one basis, and even worse, she's injured and blind, what a blow to the reputation of the 'Seven Freaks of Jiangnan'!" He then attacked more furiously with his whip, focusing on trying to hit her back. Han Xiaoying and Quan Jinfa, noticing their enemy staggering, also increased the



vigor of their attacks. Just as it seemed they would carry the day against her, a storm arose and dark clouds covered the sky again. Suddenly, the mixed violent gusts of wind and rain blinded them again. The three Freaks dropped to the ground to protect themselves. Much later, the storm abated and the moon again showed from behind the clouds. Han Baoju jumped to his feet and uttered a scream of frustration; Mei Chaofeng and the body of Chen Xuanfeng had disappeared. What greeted him was the sight of his severely injured friends lying on the ground. The small head of Guo Jing slowly appeared from behind some rocks. Everyone was soaked to the bone.

The three uninjured survivors rose to take care of the injured. Nan Xiren had a broken arm, but fortunately no internal injuries. Ke Zhen'E and Zhu Cong, whose neigong was powerful, were not too affected either, even though they had been hit by several strokes from 'Copper Corpse'. However, Zhang Ahsheng had been hit two times by the 'Nine Yin White Bone Claws' and also received a deadly stroke to the head. He was conscious but his life was on the line.

Seeing him close to death, the Six collapsed in sadness, especially Han Xiaoying who knew very well that the Fifth brother had been in love with her for a long time. But she was a bit of a tomboy, enjoying martial arts above all else, and had little to do with matters of the heart. Zhang Ahsheng, for his part, laughed it off the whole time; they had never admitted to any feelings. Thinking of how he had thrown himself under the enemy's claws to protect her, she hugged Zhang sobbing.

Zhang Ahsheng's plump face was normally cheerful and smiling. Even now he smiled slightly and his big hand softly caressed Xiaoying's hair. "Don't cry", he said to her trying to comfort her. "Don't cry. I am alright."

"Fifth brother", she said while hiccupping back her sobs, "do you want to marry me?"

Zhang gave a silly laugh, causing the pain from his injuries to make him suffer badly, and he began to lose consciousness.

"Fifth brother", she continued, "I assure you that I already consider myself your wife... I won't ever marry anyone else. After my death, we will remain together for eternity."

"Seventh sister", mumbled Zhang, "I have not taken good care of you... Me... I am not worthy of you..."

"You always took very good care of me", she sobbed. "I always knew it..."

With his eyes full of tears, Zhu Cong asked Guo Jing, "When you came here, was it to learn martial arts from us?"

"Yes", the child answered.

"Then you must obey us from now on."

Guo Jing nodded his head.

"We, the seven brothers and sister will all be your Shifus," continued Zhu Cong while wiping away his tears. "But now, your fifth Shifu's spirit is going to leave us, kowtow and pay him homage."

Guo Jing didn't know what precisely what 'spirit is going to leave us' meant, but he immediately obeyed, kowtowing and touching the ground with his forehead.

Zhang Ahsheng, his face white like linen, forced himself to smile. "That is sufficient... Brave boy, I won't be able to teach you my knowledge... Ah, but if I did and even if you had learned what I know, it would not serve you very well. I

am not naturally quick witted, and rather lazy about practicing... I relied on the little strength that I had... had I worked more, maybe I would not have met a sad end today..." He almost fainted and became even paler.

"Neither are you", he said while panting, "naturally gifted; it's absolutely necessary for you to put in a lot of effort. When you're tempted to be lazy, think about your Fifth Shifu and the state in which you see him..." He wanted to continue, but didn't have any more strength.

Han Xiaoying lowered her ear to Zhang's mouth, and heard him barely say, "Teach the child well... Don't let us lose to that cow-nose Taoist priest..."

"Be assured", said Han Xiaoying, "the 'Seven Freaks of Jiangnan' will not lose!"

Zhang Ahsheng gave a small foolish laugh, closed his eyes, departed this world, and returned his soul.

The Six Freaks broke into sobs. Since they had become sworn brothers, a very strong bond united them. During the past years searching for Li Ping and her son, they had lived day and night together. And now, at this moment, one of them had tragically died in this foreign land. How could they not be overwhelmed with grief? After having cried themselves out, they dug a grave and buried Zhang Ahsheng. When they finished, they erected a big rock to mark the place of his grave. By then the sun had already risen.

Quan Jinfa and Han Baoju left to search for visible clues that could lead them to Mei Chaofeng. After the storm, the sand showed no traces of her passing and it was impossible to know where she had gone. They extended their search for several li around the mountain, but came up with nothing.

“In the steppe”, Zhu Cong said, “I imagine that this blind... this woman can’t go very far. The poisoned projectiles should have taken effect by now and she will probably die somewhere. Let’s take the child back home first and take care of our injured. After that, Third and Sixth brother, and Seventh sister can continue the search.”

All agreed and shed some more tears while saying farewell at the grave of their deceased brother.

# Chapter 5 - Crooked Bow Shooting Eagles

Translated by Foreva and Strunf



*Temujin smiled, aimed his bow and shot an arrow of iron that, like the lightning, slicing through the body of a black eagle. The crowd applauded. The Khan then gave his bow to Ogedai. "It's your turn!"*

A row of people came down the mountain. After walking for a while, they suddenly heard the roars of wild beasts in front of them. Han Baoju leapt on his yellow horse, and went to see what was happening. After galloping for a while, the yellow horse suddenly stopped and no amount of urging would make it move.

Knowing in his heart that there was something strange ahead, he stood in the stirrups and looked into the distance; he could see a group of people with some leopards clawing at the earth. Knowing the yellow horse's fear of leopards, he jumped off and took hold of his Golden Dragon whip. Moving forward, he saw that the two leopards had uncovered a body. Continuing forward a few more steps, he saw that the body was that of 'Copper Corpse' Chen Xuanfeng. The area from his collar bone to his lower abdomen was a blood covered mess, as though the skin had been sliced off.

Surprised, he thought, "He was killed by the boy last night with a dagger thrust through his navel, so why is his corpse here? Since he is already dead, why would anyone do this to his corpse? Who did it and what is the meaning behind it? Do the 'Twin Killers of the Dark Winds' have another enemy in the desert with hatred that strong?"

Not long after, Zhu Cong and the others arrived. No one could understand the reason behind the mutilation. They looked at Chen Xuanfeng's corpse, whose face still showed a fierce expression, which caused a quick shiver of fear in everyone. Thinking back to last night's terrifying fight on

the barren hills, they knew, that if not for Guo Jing's lucky hit with his dagger, the outcome might have been very different. Just thinking about it brought a chill to their hearts.

By this time, the two leopards were chewing on the corpse. To one side, there was a little boy on a horse loudly urging the leopard handlers to drag the leopards away. Turning his head, he saw Guo Jing, and shouted to him "Ha! So you are hiding here. You didn't have the guts to help Tolui fight, what a useless friend!" It was Senggum's son Dukhsh.

"You all fought Tolui again? Where is he?" worried, Guo Jing asked.

"I'm taking the leopards to eat him up. You'd better surrender now, or else I will include you too," Dukhsh replied smugly. He had seen the 'Six Freaks of the South' at one side, if not for them, Dukhsh would have already sent the leopards to attack Guo Jing.

Guo Jing persisted, "Where is Tolui?"

Ignoring him, Dukhsh shouted loudly, "The leopards will eat Tolui now!" as he led the leopard handlers away. One leopard handler advised him, "Little master, that boy is Temujin Khan's son." Dukhsh immediately hit the leopard handler with a slash of his riding whip, shouting, "What is there to be afraid of? How dare he raise his hand to hit me today? Move aside!" The leopard handler, not daring to disobey his order, followed Dukhsh. The other leopard handler was afraid that this might cause some irreversible problems; he turned and ran, shouting, "I'm going to inform Temujin Khan." He was gone before Dukhsh could stop him. Dukhsh said bitterly, "Fine, by the time Uncle Temujin comes, it'll be too late! Then we'll see what kind of

solution he comes up with." He whipped his horse, forcing the group to move faster.

Although Guo Jing was terribly afraid of leopards, he was more worried about his sworn brother's safety. He said to Han Xiaoying, "Shifu, Dukhsh is going to get the leopards to eat my sworn brother. I need to inform him so he can escape."

"If you hurry there, may be the leopards might eat you too? Aren't you afraid?" Han Xiaoying asked.

He replied, "I'm afraid."

"Are you still going?"

After hesitating for a split-second, Guo Jing affirmed, "I'm still going!" before running away rapidly.

Because Zhu Cong's wound was still painful, he was quietly lying forward on his horse's neck. Noting Guo Jing's chivalrous heart, he mused, "This child may not be very smart, but he is, nevertheless, a person worthy of our generation."

Han Xiaoying replied, "Fourth brother's perception is right! Let's go save them."

Quan Jinfa cautioned the rest, "This little lord keeps leopards at home; he must be the son of an important general. We'd better be careful not to create trouble, since three of us are injured."

Han Baoju used his lightness kung fu to catch, pick up, and place Guo Jing on his shoulders. Although Han Baoju is small with short legs, he can still move very quickly. For Guo Jing, sitting on his fat and sturdy shoulders was like riding on a good war horse, fast and steady. Han Baoju rushed to 'Wind Chaser's' side, and with a great leap, he took Guo



Jing with him onto the horse's back. Within moments, they caught up with Dukhsh and the leopard handlers. After a short gallop, they saw ten or more kids surrounding Tolui. It was Dukhsh's gang following his orders. They were not trying to attack him, just trying to keep Tolui from leaving.

Having been taught three skillful moves by Zhu Cong, Tolui had practiced the moves that night until he was familiar with them all. Come morning, he was not able to find Guo Jing or to get his third brother Ogedai to help him. Tolui bravely went to fight Dukhsh by himself. Dukhsh had brought along ten or so reinforcements. Seeing him alone rather surprised him. When Tolui requested that they only fight one on one and not attack him as a group, Dukhsh agreed immediately. He thought that there's no way Tolui could beat him. But once they started fighting, Tolui kept using the three moves that Zhu Cong taught him, and incredibly, he managed to best Dukhsh. Although the three moves that Zhu Cong taught him were simple, they were actually the essence of the 'Vacant Fist' technique. Furthermore, since these three moves had no complicated changes, Tolui, being very smart, picked it up immediately. So when he used them, the other Mongolian kids were no match for him. The Mongolians place great importance on keeping promises. Since they had agreed to battle one on one only and even though they were upset, they could not do anything about it. Tolui made Dukhsh fall twice, and even hit him on the nose. Dukhsh was furious, so he ran off to get his father's hunting leopards.

After single handedly winning against so many kids, Tolui was very proud of himself. That was why he stood quietly in the center of the surrounding kids, not even thinking about running away. Unknown to him, big trouble was coming.

From the distance, Tolui heard Guo Jing's faint shouts, "Tolui, Tolui, run away now. Dukhsh is bringing his leopards

to eat you up!”

Tolui was shocked and tried to rush out of the circle. But the kids surrounding him kept blocking him; there was no way for him to escape. Soon the Six Freaks of the South, together with Dukhsh, arrived one after the other. Following them, the leopard handlers led the leopards there. Though the Six Freaks of the South could have prevented the oncoming danger by catching Dukhsh, they did not want to create more trouble. They also wanted to see how Tolui and Guo Jing faced the danger, so they did not offer any help.

Suddenly, they heard sound of numerous horses coming like the wind. Someone shouted at the top of their lungs, “Don't let the leopards go, don't let go of the leopards!” Muqali, Boroqul and the rest of the ‘Four Aces’ had arrived. When they heard the leopard handler's report, they didn't have enough time to inform Temujin, and hurriedly rushed to the scene. Temujin, Ong Khan, Jamuka, Senggum and the others were at the Mongolian camp chatting with Wanyan Honglie and his brother. Hearing the leopard handler's report, they were shocked and ran out of the ger and leapt on their horses.

“Quickly inform them that I order Dukhsh not to do this. It is important that Temujin Khan's son is not injured,” Ong Khan ordered. His men rode their most spirited horses to where the trouble was.

Because Wanyan Hongxi was not able to see the leopards fighting against men yesterday, he was still feeling bored. Hearing this, he felt excitement rise and stood up exclaiming, “Let's all go take a look!”

Wanyan Honglie speculated, “If Senggum's leopards really kill Temujin's son, then their families will no longer be

friendly. After that happens, they may start fighting. Who knows, maybe both sides will suffer terrible losses and be severely weakened. That will definitely be good fortune for my Jin country!"

The Wanyan brothers, Ong Khan, Senggum, Jamuka and the others arrived at the scene, only to see that the two hunting leopards' chains had already been unfastened. The leopards crouched on the ground with low growling noises coming from their throats. In front of the leopards stood two kids, Tolui and his younger sworn brother Guo Jing. Temujin and his 'Four Aces' raised their bows and pointed them at the leopards; they were ready for action. Although Temujin saw his youngest son in a dangerous situation, he also knew that those two hunting leopards were very precious to Senggum. Senggum had caught the leopards when they were young; he reared and trained them until they grew strong and ferocious. Since that could not be achieved easily and took much time, Temujin felt that if the leopards did not attack, he wouldn't harm them.

Seeing the crowd arriving and relying on his grandfather's and father's adoration for him, Dukhsh felt even more courageous. He kept urging the leopards to attack.

Ong Khan then shouted, "Stop this now!"

The sounds of hooves were heard as someone riding a red horse arrived. On the horse was a middle-aged woman, clad in leopard fur, and in her arms, a little girl. It was Temujin's wife, Tolui's mother.

She had been chatting in the camp with Senggum's wife. When she heard the news, she immediately rushed out with her daughter Hua Zheng. Seeing the danger, she was both shocked and worried. She shouted "Quickly, shoot the arrow!" With all her being focused on her son, she

absentmindedly placed her daughter on the ground, forgetting about her safety.

As a little girl of four years, how was Hua Zheng supposed to know of the leopard's ferocious nature? She happily bounded over to her brother's side. Spotting the leopards with their pretty colored fur, she was reminded of her second brother Ogedai's hunting dogs. She stretched her hand out, wanting to pat the leopard's head. The crowd was startled, and yelled at her to stop; but it was already too late. The two leopards, already nervous and agitated, growled at the same time, and leapt forward fiercely. Alarmed, the crowd called out in distress.

Although Temujin had already aimed his arrow, Hua Zheng's sudden appearance was something that no one had expected. In the blink of an eye, the leopards were in the air. Hua Zheng was blocking Temujin's aim at the strategic spot on the leopard's head where they have to be hit to ensure an instant kill. A shot by Temujin now would only injure the leopard, and that would aggravate it further. The 'Four Aces' threw down their bows and drew their knives. As they moved forward, they saw Guo Jing roll forward to pick up Hua Zheng; at the same time one leopard's front claws was on Guo Jing's shoulder. The 'Four Aces' raised their knives, only to hear several faint sounds. When the noises passed, the two leopards suddenly fell growling and rolling from side to side. After a short time they were motionless.

Boroqul went forward to find out what had happened. He saw blood running from the leopards' foreheads. It was obvious that a kung fu master had used a hidden weapon to hit the leopards' brains. He turned around and saw six calm, composed Han people standing to one side watching the on-going scene. He knew that the hidden weapons had been thrown by them. Temujin's wife hurriedly picked up

the now bawling Hua Zheng from Guo Jing's arms and pulled Tolui to her bosom as she tried to comfort Hua Zheng.

Senggum asked angrily, "Who killed the leopards?"

The crowd remained silent and no one answered. Ke Zhen'E had heard the leopards' growls, and fearing that the leopards would harm Guo Jing, had thrown four projectiles with poisonous tips. Since that action only took a wave of the hand, and since everyone had their eyes focused on the leopards, there was no one who actually saw who fired them.

Temujin smiled and said, "Brother Senggum, I'll repay you with four good leopards when we get back, and I'll add eight pairs of black eagles."

Senggum was seething with anger when he heard that, but he remained silent. By now, Ong Khan was angrily scolding Dukhsh. Humiliated at receiving this treatment in front of the crowd, he tried to deflect the blame from himself. In a fit of temper he lay down on the ground and began rolling and hitting, crying and shouting. Ong Khan loudly commanded him to stop, but he did not care.

Because Temujin was still grateful for what Ong Khan had done for him in the past, he felt that it would be a pity to break up the two families' friendship over such a small matter. He smiled and bent over to pick up Dukhsh. Dukhsh was still crying and yelling and tried his best to struggle, but could not. Still smiling, Temujin tried to salvage the situation, "Step-father, the kids were only playing, there's no need to get worked up. I think he is a good boy and I'm thinking of betrothing my daughter to him. What do you think?"

Ong Khan saw that Hua Zheng had eyes like glistening dew, and skin like a baby lamb, fair and cute, and felt happy in his heart. Laughingly, he said, "What could be wrong with that? Let's have an even closer relationship; I'll betroth my eldest granddaughter to your son Jochi."

Temujin agreed, "Thanks Step-father!" He turned around and said to Senggum, "Brother Senggum, we are now in-laws!"

Senggum had always felt that he was of a higher status than Temujin. He was already jealous of Temujin, yet looked down on him. Although he was not happy about becoming in-laws with Temujin, he could not go against his father's wishes. He could only smile weakly.

At this point, Wanyan Honglie noticed the 'Six Freaks of the South', and he was shocked. "What are they doing here? I'm sure they are chasing me. I wonder if the temperamental Taoist priest with the surname Qiu is around here as well?" he asked himself. Since he currently had the protection of numerous soldiers, he was not afraid of them. But if he gave the command to capture them, he was afraid that it might cause trouble. The 'Six Freaks' were listening to Temujin's and the others' conversations and had not even noticed him. He turned and moved behind the crowd of soldiers, while at the same time thinking of ways to handle the matter. As for Ong Khan and Temujin's families' engagement, he did not think much of it.

Temujin knew that it was the 'Six Freaks of the South' that saved his daughter's life, and he waited for Ong Khan and the others to leave, before commanding Boroqul to reward them richly with furs and gold. He then reached his hand out to stroke the top of Guo Jing's head and repeatedly praised him for his courage and valor. Temujin said that risking his own life to save another, is something that not all

adults will do, much less a small child. When he asked Guo Jing why was he so brave, Guo Jing just stood there dumbly since he could not find an answer. After pondering for some time, he said, "Leopards will eat people."

Hearing that, Temujin laughed loudly. Tolui then told why he started fighting with Dukhsh. When Temujin heard how Dukhsh kept mentioning embarrassing events from his past, anger boiled deep in his heart. He said nothing about it, only saying, "In the future, don't bother with him." Temujin then turned to Quan Jinfa and asked, "How much gold do you want to stay in my camp to teach my son kung fu?"

Quan Jinfa thought, "We were thinking of finding a place to teach Guo Jing kung fu. If we can teach him here, there would no better place." He replied, "The Great Khan's willingness to accept the six of us is something we could not have asked for. You can pay us whatever you decide is suitable, we wouldn't dare to discuss or argue about the amount." Temujin was pleased and he told Boroqul to look after them; after that, he left to see off the Wanyan brothers.

The Six Freaks of the South rode slowly behind the others while they discussed the matter.

Han Baoju said, "The skin on the chest of Chen Xuanfeng's corpse was removed by someone; it must have been an enemy of his."

Quan Jinfa replied, "The 'Twin Killers of the Dark Winds' are cruel and ruthless; having many enemies isn't something to be surprised at. But I don't understand why his enemy didn't simply chop up his body, or slash him all over. Why only slice off a large piece of skin from his chest?"

"I have been thinking of that all this time, but I still cannot figure out the reasoning behind it," Ke Zhen'E replied. "The most pressing task at hand is to find out where 'Iron Corpse' is.

"Precisely! If that person is not killed, she will bring much danger to us in the future. I'm afraid that she will not die from the poison," Zhu Cong agreed.

With tears in her eyes, Han Xiaoying spoke up, "Fifth brother's dead, how could we not avenge him?"

So Han Baoju, Han Xiaoying and Quan Jinfu, rode their fast horses to try to find 'Iron Corpse'. But after numerous days of searching, they were not able to find a trace of her. Han Baoju considered, "The woman's eyes were hit by elder brother's poison projectiles. The poison must have worked on her by now; she probably died in some mountain valley." The rest of them agreed. Ke Zhen'E knew in his heart that the 'Twin Killers of the Dark Winds' were very smart and devious. Unless he could touch her corpse with his own hands, it would always remain a heavy weight on his heart. He did not want to bother his younger brothers and sister with his worries and did not tell them of his concerns.

From then on, the Six Freaks of the South remained on the steppe, teaching Guo Jing and Tolui kung fu. Temujin knew that kung fu is for protecting oneself in close contact with an opponent. He wanted Tolui and Guo Jing to learn these techniques briefly, and to spend most of their time learning riding, shooting with their bows and arrows, and learning other important skills of the battlefield. The 'Six Freaks of the South' were not familiar with these Mongol skills so Guo Jing and Tolui learned these from Jebe and Boroquul.

In the evenings, the 'Six Freaks of the South' taught Guo Jing alone, teaching him fists, sword, hidden weapons, and



lightness kung fu. Although Guo Jing was slow by nature, he knew that he had to avenge his father in the future using kung fu, so he did not complain and worked as hard as he could.

Zhu Cong, Quan Jinfa and Han Xiaoying's kung fu was a bit too hard for him to comprehend. With Han Baoju and Nan Xiren's basic kung fu, he just followed their directions exactly and slowly but steadily learned it. This basic kung fu strengthened bodies but was not designed to overcome an enemy and win a fight.

Han Baoju often said, "Training you is like training a camel. Strong is strong, but can a camel be victorious over a leopard?"

Whenever he heard that, Guo Jing only showed a silly smile. When the Six Freaks taught Guo Jing, they only supervised his learning, instead of explaining it to him. Of the ten moves they tried to teach him, he couldn't learn a single one; they could not help feeling discouraged. Whenever they talked about it, they would only sigh and shake their heads. Although they knew that their chances of being victorious over Qiu Chuji's disciple were almost non-existent, an agreement had been made so they couldn't give up. As a business man, Quan Jinfa's talents lay in the field of intricate calculations. He often said, "For Qiu Chuji to find the Yang family widow, I figure he has about an eighty percent chance of success. That improves our chances by twenty percent. Whether the Yang family widow gave birth to a boy or girl, who knows? The chance that she gave birth to a boy is only half, with that, we potentially gain another forty percent. If it's a son, maybe he won't survive to adulthood, we then gain another ten percent. Even if he manages to grow up, maybe he'll be as stupid as Jing'er. Therefore, I'd say that we still have an eighty percent chance of winning."

The other five 'Freaks' thought that what he said wasn't wrong, however, saying that the Yang family's son's aptitude for learning martial arts might be the same as Guo Jing's, they had to know that Quan Jinfu was trying to console them. Luckily, Guo Jing had a good heart and he is exceedingly obedient, so the 'Six Freaks' really liked his character a lot.

On the prairies of Outer Mongolia, the coming of green summer grass and the brilliant white of winter snows, ten years quickly went by. Guo Jing had become a sturdy youth of sixteen. There were only two years left until the martial arts competition, so the 'Six Freaks' stepped up their supervision. They ordered him to stop practicing riding and shooting temporarily, and from dusk to dawn, concentrate on practicing fists and the sword. During these ten years, Temujin had many battles and had swallowed up numerous other tribes into his own. He commanded his subordinates strictly, and all his soldiers were courageous and excelled in fighting. He was both courageous and resourceful and knew when to attack using force or attack using strategy. In all of Mongolia, no one could be compared to him. As the livestock bred and numbers grew, the population also increased, so that the differences between Temujin and Ong Khan's tribes became smaller.

The violent winds gradually stopped and the heavy snows began to decrease, but the outer prairies of Mongolia still remained bitterly cold. A certain day arrived; it was the Pure Brightness Festival. (Note: Qing Ming Festival. A day for paying respects to the dead. The Chinese pay their respects at their ancestor's / family's graves, and may clean up the grave and pull out the weeds etc.) The 'Six Freaks of the South' arose early and Guo Jing with them; they took cows and sheep as sacrificial items to Zhang Aosheng's grave and swept it. Since the Mongolians are nomads, they

move around more or less continuously. They have no fixed place to stay. At this point in time, the Mongolian camp was quite far away from Zhang Ahsheng's grave. Even riding fast horses, it took them more than half of a day to get there. The seven of them climbed the barren hill and swept away the piled up snow from the grave. They then lit candles, burned incense, and knelt in front of the grave praying.

Han Xiaoying secretly prayed, "Fifth brother, for the past ten years we've given all of our energy and our hearts to teaching this child. His gift for learning isn't good and he can't learn our martial arts properly. I hope that fifth brother's spirit in the heavens will watch over him now and at the Jiaxing martial arts competition in two years time. Do not let this child spoil the prestige and name of the 'Seven Freaks of the South'!"

The 'Six Freaks' were born and lived their lives in the south, with its warm hills and waters. During the time they stayed in the Mongolian desert with its cold winds, they had become weaker and frailer and their faces looked lean and somber. The hair at their temples had started turning white. Although Han Xiaoying's charisma and attractiveness had not lessened, she was no longer the pink-cheeked young girl of yesteryear.

Zhu Cong surveyed the graveside piles of skulls. After ten years of enduring winds and snow, the skulls had not started to decay. In his heart, there was a feeling that he could not express. Throughout these years, he had searched all over the surrounding country for hundreds of li with Quan Jinfa. They searched in every mountain valley and in every cave, trying to find Mei Chaofeng. Had she died from poisoning, there should be a skeleton left behind. If she did not die, it would be very hard for a blind woman to live in seclusion for a long time and not leave a trail of

some kind. Nonetheless, she had vanished into thin air like a spirit. On this lonely hill in the wilderness, in this grave and the piles of white bones, lay the only marks that the 'Twin Killers of the Dark Winds' had left behind in the desert. The seven stayed in front of the grave to have a memorial meal and drink; then returned to their dwellings. After a short rest, the 'Six Freaks' took Guo Jing to the hillside to practice his martial arts.

One day his fourth master, 'Wood Chopper of the Southern Mountains' Nan Xiren and he practiced using the 'Open Hills Palms' Technique (Kai Shan Zhang Fa). Nan Xiren intended that he use as much martial arts as he could. They sparred for around seventy or eighty moves continuously before Nan Xiren suddenly pushed his left palm outwards and flipped his body in the move 'The Hawk Hunting Rabbits' (Cang Ying Bu Tu), aiming the palm at Guo Jing's back. Guo Jing bent over to avoid his move; then moving his leg in a circular motion with the move 'Autumn Winds Sweeping the Fallen Leaves' (Qiu Feng Sao Luo Ye), he swept his leg towards his teacher's lower body. Nan Xiren countered using 'Iron Bull Tilling the Land' (Tie Niu Tian Di), attacking with his palms. Guo Jing had just started to withdraw his leg to change his stance, when Nan Xiren suddenly shouted "Remember this move!" His left hand swiftly moved out and tried to hit Guo Jing's chest from the front. Guo Jing's right palm hurriedly moved to block, because this palm is considered rather fast. Then Nan Xiren's left palm flew out, and with a slap, both palms connected. Although Nan Xiren only used about thirty percent of his power, Guo Jing could not help falling over. Both his hands hit the ground, but he immediately jumped up, with a look of shame showing on his face.

Nan Xiren was just about to instruct him about the essence of this move, when suddenly, from a grove of trees, came

two bursts of laughter. Then a youthful girl came out, clapping her hands and smiling. She shouted, "Guo Jing, are you beaten by your teacher again?"

Guo Jing's face turned red as he said, "I'm practicing now, don't bother me!"

The young girl laughed, "I like seeing you getting beaten up!"

The girl was Temujin's young daughter Hua Zheng. She, Tolui and Guo Jing were around the same age, and they'd played together since they were small. Because her parents doted on her, it is not surprising that she was a bit arrogant and willful. Since birth, Guo Jing's character was straight forward and simple; whenever she threw a tantrum without reason, they always clashed. However, after arguing, they would soon make up. Hua Zheng knew that she was wrong and would sooth his feelings with soft words. Hua Zheng's mother still remembered how Guo Jing risked his life at the leopard's mouth to save her daughter. She was especially fond of him and often gave gifts of clothing and livestock to his mother and him.

Guo Jing said, "I'm practicing with my teacher, go away!"

Hua Zheng laughed and said, "This is practicing? I'd call it getting beaten up!"

While they were talking, several Mongolian soldiers arrived. One Ten Soldier Leader got off his horse, and bowed to Hua Zheng, saying, "Hua Zheng, Great Khan is calling for you." Mongolians are simple by nature, and do not have the courteous customs of the Han people. Although Hua Zheng is the Khan's daughter, everyone still called her by her name. Hua Zheng said, "What for?" The Ten Soldier Leader replied, "Ong Khan's messengers have arrived."

Hua Zheng wrinkled her brow and said angrily "I'm not going."

The Ten Soldier Leader continued, "If you don't go, the Khan will be angry."

When she was very young, Hua Zheng had been betrothed to Ong Khan's grandson Dukhsh by her father. But over the years, she had developed a close relationship with Guo Jing, although it really couldn't be said that there are feelings between them. Yet, whenever she thought about having to part from Guo Jing to marry that infamously arrogant Dukhsh, she couldn't help but feel sad. She pursed her small mouth and kept silent as she thought. In the end, she did not dare disobey her father's command, and followed the Ten Soldier Leader back to the camp.

Ong Khan and Senggum decided that Senggum's son has grown up and wanted to pick a date for the marriage. Therefore, they sent people with gifts and Temujin wanted her to meet the messengers.

That night while Guo Jing was sleeping, he suddenly heard the soft sound of someone clapping three times outside the ger. He sat and heard someone speaking the Han language, "Guo Jing, come out."

Guo Jing was curious but didn't know the voice. He lifted up a corner of the flap of the door cover and peered outside. In the moonlight he saw a person standing near a large tree.

Guo Jing went out of the ger and moved forward to see that the person was dressed in a large sleeved long robe and hair combed into a bun; this person looked like neither a man nor a woman. The face was hidden by the shadows of the tree and couldn't be seen clearly. The person was actually a Taoist priest, but Guo Jing had never seen a

Taoist priest before and asked, "Who are you? Why are you looking for me?"

The person said, "You are Guo Jing?"

"Yes," Guo Jing replied.

The person demanded, "Where's your dagger that can cut iron as though it were mud? Take it out and show me!" He suddenly moved and leapt close by to him; then he sent out a palm aimed right for his chest. Guo Jing knew that the person attacked without reason and his attack was vicious; he was greatly surprised and moved sideways immediately to evade the palm. He shouted, "What was that for?"

The person said with a smile, "Just testing your abilities." Then with his left arm, he sent out a fist with strength that was fierce and swift.

Guo Jing, feeling anger rising, slanted his body to avoid the move. Then he raised his right hand and fiercely grabbed the enemy's wrist while his left hand moved to take his opponent's elbow. This move was the 'Strong Soldier Breaks the Wrist' (Zhuang Shi Duan Wan) from 'Disconnect the Muscles and Separating the Bones' technique (Fen Jing Cuo Gu Shou). You need only catch hold of the enemy's wrist, then the elbow, push forward a little, then a twist, and with a "kacha" sound, the right wrist bone will be twisted out of place. The 'Disconnect the Muscles and Separating the Bones' technique was passed on to him by his second teacher Zhu Cong. Although Zhu Cong's language and everyday behavior tends to be comical, his mind is actually very sharp. Ke Zhen'E and he had secretly held several discussions about Mei Chaofeng. Although both of her eyes were injured by poisoned projectiles, her martial arts are unusual and strange; perhaps she was able to resist the poison. If she did not die, she will definitely seek revenge.

The longer the time before she shows herself, the more thorough her plans will be and the more vicious and evil her methods. In the past ten years, even though no trace of Mei Chaofeng had been discovered, the 'Six Freaks' were never complacent; in fact, they were even more cautious than ever. Whenever Zhu Cong looked at the fingernail scars left on the back of his hand, he couldn't help but feel fearful. When he thought about her strong martial arts, he knew it would be very difficult to harm her. To resist the 'Nine Yin White Bone Claw', why not use the 'Disconnect the Muscles and Separating the Bones' technique? This kung fu set focuses on dislocating or breaking the opponent's bones, using ultra fast methods, to attack the other party's limbs, skull and neck bones.

In the past, back home in China, Zhu Cong regretted he had never asked for advice from any Masters that were experts in this style of kung fu. None of his brothers and sister knew it either.

After thinking for some time, he remembered that all the martial arts in the world were created by people. Since there is no one here to teach this technique to me, will it be hard for me to create my own version? His nickname, 'Magical Hands Scholar' (Miao Shou Shu Sheng), referred to his very fast hands. Furthermore, he was very familiar with attacking accupoints and knows their positions well. Using his unique talents, he re-created the 'Disconnect the Muscles and Separating the Bones' method without too much difficulty. After numerous years of practice, the essence of this technique was deeply ingrained in him. Although his method may differ from Shaolin kung fu, it was still powerful. He analyzed and worked on it with Quan Jinfa, and then passed on his techniques to Guo Jing.

Guo Jing was battling a strong opponent, so when he started attacking, the first move he used was the



'Disconnect the Muscles and Separating the Bones' move.

Although not an expert, he practiced this kung fu a lot, and the way he used the moves was close to perfect. That person's wrist and elbow was suddenly held by Guo Jing, and in surprise, he sent out his left palm swiftly, aiming for Guo Jing's face. Guo Jing wanted to twist the enemy's wrist bones out of place, but the enemy's palm suddenly came. With both hands holding onto his enemy, he had no way to defend. All he could do was let go and leap backwards. He felt the force of the palm sweeping past his face with an uncomfortable burning sensation.

When he turned around, he saw his enemy was actually a handsome youth of around seventeen or eighteen years, with a refined face and long lashes. He heard him say in a low voice, "Your kung fu is not bad. You did not waste the Six Freaks of the South's ten years of teaching."

Guo Jing was only using one palm to protect himself, so he was very cautious and asked, "Who are you? Why are you looking for me?"

The youth shouted, "Let's spar again." Before he stopped speaking, he'd already raised his palms from his side.

Guo Jing stayed calm and did not move; he waited until he could feel the movement of the air caused by the enemy's palm nearing his chest. He moved his body slightly and his left hand grasped the enemy's arm. He raised his right hand and pinched the enemy's cheek. He had only to hold onto the enemy's face, swiftly pull outwards, and the jaw joint will dislocate.

This move was given a humorous name by Zhu Cong; he called it 'Jokes will Undo the Jaws' (Xiao Yu Jie Yi), meaning laughing until the chin drops. This time around, the youth was more alert, and used his right hand to defend while

attacking horizontally with his left. Guo Jing still used the 'Disconnect the Muscles and Separating the Bones' technique to defend. Within a short time, they had exchanged more than ten moves. The youthful priest's movements were light and graceful; his palms swift and powerful. Before the palm hits, his body had moved, and it was hard to tell where the palms came from.

This was the very first time that Guo Jing fought an enemy using martial arts, and it was against one with high kung fu skills. After battling for awhile, he felt despair. The youth's left foot flew out, and with a pat, hit Guo Jing's right hip. Luckily, the enemy did not use all his strength and Guo Jing's basic kung fu was very strong. His body only shook a little, and immediately both palms were flying again, protecting all the weak spots on his body, as he tried his best to defend and attack. The youthful priest kept pressing him hard, and Guo Jing knew that he could not cope for much longer. Suddenly he heard a voice from behind him shouting, "Attack his lower body!" It was his third teacher Han Baoju's voice, and he felt joy in his heart. He angled his body to the right then turned around. He saw that all of his six teachers had been standing behind him for a long time. With all of his concentration focused on battling the enemy, he did not notice that they were there.

His spirits rose greatly and he followed his third teacher's advice, fiercely attacking the priest's lower body. The priest's body was lightly built, and his lower body, as his third teacher was pointing out, was definitely not very strong. Since spectators could usually see the flaws from the sidelines, the Six Freaks of the South had seen his from the beginning. After being attacked by Guo Jing for a time, the youth couldn't help but fall back. Guo Jing felt that victory was near. Seeing his enemy stumble, he attacked with a series of 'Mandarin Duck' kicks (Yuan Yang), with

both feet flying. But his enemy was only trying to trick Guo Jing with this ruse; both Han Baoju and Han Xiaoying called out together, "Watch out!"

Because Guo Jing lacked experience, he didn't even know what to watch out for, when his right foot kicked out, it was instantly grabbed by the enemy.

The youthful priest took advantage of the way he kicked and sent his palm out to hit him. Guo Jing couldn't resist it, and with a somersault, he fell onto the ground. He landed on his back and it hurt terribly. With the move 'Carp Flipping Upright' (Li Yu Da Ting), he immediately sprang up to attack again, but saw his six teachers surrounding the youthful priest. The priest neither resisted nor tried to attack; he raised his hands together in the traditional greeting manner, and said in a clear voice, "Disciple Yin Zhiping is following the instructions of my honored teacher 'Chang Chun Zi' [Eternal Spring] Qiu Chuji, who asks if the masters are well." While saying that, he respectfully kowtowed.

Hearing that this person was sent by Qiu Chuji, the 'Six Freaks of the South' were curious but feared that it might be part of some scheme. They did not raise their arms to help him up. Yin Zhiping stood up and took out a letter. With both hands, he presented it to Zhu Cong.

Ke Zhen'E heard patrolling Mongolian soldiers coming nearer so he said, "Let's talk inside."

Yin Zhiping followed the 'Six Freaks' into their ger. Quan Jinfa lit a candle made of sheep's fat. It was the ger that the five male Freaks lived in; Han Xiaoying lived in another ger with other unmarried Mongolian women. Yin Zhiping saw that the furnishings in the ger were simple and rough and thought that the 'Six Freaks' everyday life must be quite

tough. He bowed again and said, "Every elder here must have suffered greatly from being here for all these years, my teacher is grateful to you beyond words. He specially commanded this disciple to come and thank each of you."

Ke Zhen'E let out a hmph, thinking, "If that truly is the reason you are here, then why did you fight Jing'er till he fell over? Were you trying to make us feel inferior before the competition?"

Zhu Cong had by now opened the envelope and taken out the letter. In his clear and resonant voice, he read out: "Quanzhen disciple, Qiu Chuji respectfully greets the 'Six Heroes of the South'. Master Ke, Master Zhu, Master Han, Master Nan, Master Quan and Heroine Han. The years have passed quickly since we parted in the south. The 'Seven Heroes' are people of their words and your righteousness and your integrity is awe-inspiring. Your benevolence and chivalry matches the ancients of old."

After hearing this, the wrinkled face of Ke Zhen'E looked somewhat pleased.

Zhu Cong continued: "Hearing that Master Zhang died in Mongolia was very saddening. I am still very shaken by Master Zhang's death. Due to your good fortune and my good luck, I was able to find the son of the late Mr. Yang nine years ago...."

"Ah..." the other five Freaks said simultaneously. They knew that Qiu Chuji was very capable and the disciples of the Quanzhen sect are spread throughout the country. It was to be expected that he would find Yang Tiexin's offspring. He must always have kept in mind the scheduled meeting for the competition in Jiaxing. Finding the mother, whose whereabouts were unknown, was like searching for a needle in a haystack. Whether the child was a girl or boy,

was up to the heavens. Had it been a girl, there would be a limit to the power of her martial arts. Hearing that the child had been found, gave them a momentarily shock. The six had never told Guo Jing's mother or him about this matter. Zhu Cong slid his eyes towards Guo Jing; seeing no change in his expression he read on, "After two years, when the flowers are blooming and the grass is long in Jiangnan, I will meet and drink with all of you masters at the Pavilion of the Drunken Immortal. Life passes like the dew, and these eighteen years are like a dream. Will the brave heroes of the world laugh at my foolishness?" When he read to this point, he stopped.

Han Baoju asked, "What is below?"

"The letter ends there. It is definitely his handwriting," Zhu Cong replied. That day in the inn, Zhu Cong had stolen a piece of poetry from Qiu Chuji's pocket and recognized his handwriting.

Ke Zhen'E asked in a somber voice, "The Yang family's child is a male? His name is Yang Kang?"

Yin Zhiping replied, "Yes."

Ke Zhen'E continued, "So he is your junior brother?"

"He is my senior brother. Although this disciple is older than him by a year, senior brother Yang started learning from the Quanzhen two years earlier," Yin Zhiping replied.

The 'Six Freaks of the South' had seen his kung fu, and Guo Jing was definitely not his match. If the junior brother is already so good, his senior brother must be even more powerful. At this point, they felt their hearts sinking. It seemed Qiu Chuji knew of their actions in detail; he even knew of Zhang Ahsheng's death. They all felt that they were on the losing end already.

Ke Zhen'E said coldly, "When you sparred with him earlier, was it to test his abilities?"

Yin Zhiping heard the hostile tone in his voice and felt anxious. He hurriedly said, "Disciple would not dare."

Ke Zhen'E said, "Go back and tell your teacher that, although the 'Six Freaks of the South' may not be as good as he, they will definitely not miss the appointment at the Pavilion of the Drunken Immortal. Tell your teacher not to worry. There will be no replying letter!"

After hearing these sentences, Yin Zhiping did not know whether to reply or not, and felt very awkward. He'd followed his teacher's instructions to come up to the north and pass on the letter, and Qiu Chuji had indeed told him to find a way to test Guo Jing's character and kung fu. The elder 'Chang Chun Zi' actually cared about his friend's son and his intentions were good. But Yin Zhiping, as a youth, was naturally more adventurous; upon reaching the Mongolian plains, he did not hurry to see the 'Six Freaks', but instead sparred with Guo Jing in the middle of the night. Seeing the unfriendly expressions the 'Six Freaks' were wearing, he felt afraid and did not dare to delay leaving. He bowed to everyone, saying, "The disciple will go now."

Ke Zhen'E suddenly said, with a sharp tone in his voice, "You should turn a somersault too!" Swiftly sweeping his left arm out, he caught hold of Yin Zhiping's collar. Yin Zhiping felt fear and used both his hands, trying to push Ke Zhen'E's arms away. He wasn't aware that if he had not attempted to get away, he would only have been made to fall with a somersault. By resisting, he only made Ke Zhen'E angrier. He bent his left arm, he lifted up Yin Zhiping's body and with a "hey" sound, threw the little priest heavily onto the ger's floor.

After landing, Yin Zhiping's back hurt badly as though it was cracked; but after awhile, he slowly struggled up and limped away.

Han Baoju said, "The little priest has no manners. It's a good thing that big brother taught him a lesson."

Ke Zhen'E was thinking, and after quite a long while, took a deep breath. The five 'Freaks' felt the same way and everyone was depressed.

Nan Xiren suddenly said, "No matter what, we still have to fight, even if it can not be won!"

Han Xiaoying said, "Fourth brother is right. After we seven became sworn siblings, we traveled over the world together. We went through many dangers and the 'Seven Freaks of the South' never retreated."

Ke Zhen'E nodded and said to Guo Jing, "Go back to sleep. We will work even harder starting from tomorrow."

Thereafter, the 'Six Freaks of the Jiangnan' were even stricter in their training. However, in studies or martial arts, as in music or mahjong, when someone tries for quick success, he risks getting precisely the opposite result and progress stops. The Six hoped for so much from their disciple that they put immense pressure on him. To make things even more difficult, Guo Jing didn't have a quick intelligent mind; on the contrary, he was slower than most young people his age. The more they wanted from him, the more he panicked and lost concentration. Since the nocturnal visit of Yin Zhiping, he hadn't made much progress for three months; he even seemed to have regressed somewhat. It was precisely what the popular belief says: 'The one that hurries too much doesn't arrive safely', and 'The one that swallows too much gets a stomach ache'.

The 'Six Freaks' were remarkable masters in their respective arts, acquired at the cost of constant effort over a long period. Wasn't it an illusion to wish for Guo Jing to acquire a mastery of all those arts in just a few years? An extremely gifted person would have a lot of trouble to accomplish such a prodigious feat; how could someone hope for the same thing from a young and not very gifted boy? The Six were conscious of the problem, and considering the character of Guo Jing, he could have practiced the techniques of Han Baoju or Nan Xiren alone and, after twenty or thirty years of fierce effort, maybe have half of their respective skills. If Zhang Ahsheng had not died prematurely, his teaching would have been the most compatible with Guo Jing's abilities. The Six wanted to beat Qiu Chuji so much that, even knowing it would be better to teach one skill rather than teach all, they could not restrain themselves and tried teaching everything they knew to this dumb disciple. During the last sixteen years, Zhu Cong had not stopped thinking about the fight in the Pavilion of the Drunken Immortal and in the Buddhist Fahua Monastery. He reviewed with precision every movement and every stroke made by Qiu Chuji. Though he had a great memory and replayed them in his mind, he didn't succeed in finding any flaws. Sometimes, he even thought that only 'Copper Corpse' and 'Iron Corpse' would be able to beat the Taoist.

In the morning, Han Xiaoying taught Guo Jing two movements of the 'Sword of the Yue Maiden'. To execute the first, 'The Branch Hits the White Gorilla', it was necessary to leap, make two turns with the sword before straightening it to attack. Guo Jing had worked hard on the stability of his lower body, but lacked the agility for the jumps. He could hardly make a half a turn in air before landing heavily. After seven or eight attempts, he didn't succeed in making it any better. Han Xiaoying began to get angry and had to force herself to stay calm. She continued



her explanations, indicating to him how to land on tiptoe, how to make his jumps, etc. But when he jumped sufficiently high, he forgot to do the turns, and his landings remained clumsy.

Han Xiaoying thought that, after suffering the rigors of the Mongolian steppe for more than ten years, and Fifth brother losing his life here, the end result was so disappointing! She felt a pain in her heart and began sobbing. Throwing her sword to the ground, she left with her hands covering her face.

Guo Jing ran after her, but didn't catch her. He stood there, stupidly immobile, with his heart broken. He knew that he owed everything to his Shifus and had hoped to succeed in the martial arts to prove to them his recognition of their teaching. Though he made every effort, he still couldn't succeed and he didn't know what to do any longer. He was lost in thought when he suddenly heard Hua Zheng's voice calling him, "Guo Jing, come quickly! Come quickly!"

He turned around and saw her on her horse with an anxious and excited expression. "What's happened?" Guo Jing asked.

"Quickly, come and see," Hua Zheng answered. "There's a fight with two big eagles."

"I'm training now."

"You trained so badly that your Shifu scolded you, am I right?"

Guo Jing nodded his head miserably.

"It is indeed a terrifying fight, come let's see it..."

Guo Jing was very tempted, but he remembered the disappointment he caused the Seventh Shifu, and shook his

head sadly. "I won't go."

"I came especially to tell you," an excited Hua Zheng said. "If you don't come, don't expect to find me later!"

"Then quickly go alone. If you tell me later how it went, it will be almost the same thing..."

Hua Zheng jumped down from her horse and with a stubborn look on her face she walked up to him. "If you won't go, I won't go either. I wonder if it's the black eagles that are going to win, or the white ones..."

"Is it the pair of big white eagles, that live on cliff?"

"Yes! Even though the black eagles outnumber them, the white ones are still very dangerous; they've already killed three or four blacks with their beaks..."

On the top of the cliff, a couple of white eagles nested. White feathers were very rare amongst eagles, and these eagles were not only completely white but also of exceptional size. The Ancients used to say that they had never seen their equal, and considered those eagles 'Divine' birds. Some women even avowed them in a cult.

Listening to her, Guo Jing couldn't hold back any longer. He took Hua Zheng's hand and the two jumped onto the back of her horse and rushed to the cliff. When they got there, they saw the white eagles fighting against seventeen or eighteen black ones, attacking them with their beaks and their talons, making feathers fly. The white eagles were bigger and stronger. A single stroke of their powerful beak on the head was enough to kill an enemy, who then fell to the ground. The others flew away; but came back soon after to surround the pair again.

The spectacle had attracted many spectators; more than six hundred men and women, from many tribes, were gathered and commenting on the fight. Even Temujin, accompanied by Ogedai and Tolui, had come and watched the fight with interest.

Guo Jing, Tolui and Hua Zheng often played at the bottom of the cliff, and saw the white eagles nearly every day flying to their nest or leaving it when going to hunt. Sometimes, the children threw them some cuts of sheep meat; the eagles then dove and snatched them with precision while in the air. By doing this, they created close ties between them and the eagles. Because the white eagles were fewer in number, the children encouraged them with great vigor. "Go, white eagles! Attack! Watch out, enemy on the left! Quickly! Well done!"

Two more black eagles fell, but the white eagles were also wounded and their white feathers were covered with blood. Suddenly, a particularly big black eagle uttered several screams and flew away, followed by about ten of its companions. They disappeared into the clouds. Four other black eagles remained fighting. Thinking they had seen the victory of the white eagles, the spectators uttered shouts of joy. Shortly after, three other black eagles also flew away to the east, pursued by one of the white eagles. Soon, they were out of sight. The remaining black eagle tried to escape the single white eagle and was about to succumb, when suddenly, strident screeches came from clouds and about ten of the black eagles that had previously flown away appeared out of the clouds and attacked the lone white eagle.

"Excellent strategy!" exclaimed Temujin, admiringly.

The isolated white eagle was not able to, in spite of its bravery, resist the constant assault of its adversaries and

fell onto the cliff, overwhelmed by black eagles. The children were very worried, and Hua Zheng exploded in sobs. "Quickly, dad!" she said while crying. "Kill the black eagles!"

But Temujin was thinking about the ruse used by the winners. "The black eagles won," he said to Ogedai and Tolui, "thanks to a very clever strategy. Don't forget it!"

His two sons acknowledged this.

After having finished the white eagle, the black eagles flew towards a cavity in the cliff. One could see the heads of two white eaglets that would likely succumb to the attack of the aggressors.

"Guo Jing, can you see?" Hua Zheng cried. "The eagles have eaglets! How come we've never noticed them? Ah, father, shoot quickly and kill those black eagles!"

Temujin smiled, aimed his bow and shot an arrow of iron that, like the lightning, slicing through the body of a black eagle. The crowd applauded. The Khan then gave his bow to Ogedai. "It's your turn!"

Ogedai pulled back the bow and also knocked his target down, as did Tolui. The black eagles started to panic. Other officers and soldiers also started to help the white eaglets, but the remaining black eagles had gained height, and it became very difficult to reach them.

"A reward for those that will make a hit!" shouted Temujin.

Jebe, a skilled archer, wanted Guo Jing, his pupil, to have his moment of glory, and handed him his own war bow. "Knee on the ground," he recommended in a low voice, "aim for the neck."

Guo Jing complied, putting his right knee on the ground. His left hand firmly held the powerful bow, and he drew the bow with his right hand. After ten years of training with the 'Six Freaks of Jiangnan', even though he had not assimilated their sophisticated martial arts, nevertheless he had acquired strength in his arms and outstanding precision when aiming a bow. Seeing two eagles flying one above the other to the left, he turned, aimed for the neck and released his projectile.

It was precisely, as the popular expression described it: "The bow bent as the full moon, the arrow flashing like a meteor". The first eagle didn't have the time to escape before the arrow pierced its neck, continuing its way and planting itself in the flank of the second bird! Only one arrow for two eagles, which fell like stones! The crowd noisily applauded and the other eagles didn't stay any longer and rushed to disperse themselves.

"Offer the two eagles to my father," whispered Hua Zheng in the ear of Guo Jing.

He obeyed. He collected the two eagles, ran to Temujin, and kneeling, he offered the two eagles to him respectfully.

Temujin appreciated, above all, skilled fighters. He was delighted to see Guo Jing suddenly bringing two eagles down with a single shot; especially since these eagles from the North were dangerous birds. The span of their wings passed one meter, their feathers were as hard as iron, and they were so strong that they could seize and carry away in the air ponies or large sheep! Even tigers and leopards were afraid of them! To kill two eagles with a single arrow constituted a remarkable exploit. "Brave boy," Temujin said while accepting the offering. "You manage the bow quite well!"

"It is master Jebe who taught me."

"The master is Jebe," said Temujin while laughing, "the disciple is also jebe." [In Mongolian, jebe means 'skilled archer'.]

"Father," Tolui said, wanting to help his sworn brother, "you promised a reward to the one that could bring an eagle down. My anda killed two of them with one shot. What reward will you grant him?"

"Whatever he wants," answered Temujin still smiling. "Guo Jing, what do you want?"

"Is it true?" insisted Tolui, delighted. "What ever he wants?"

"Do I have the habit of lying... even to children?"

During all these years, Guo Jing had lived under the Khan's protection. Everyone in the tribe liked him for his simplicity and his kindness, and no one rejected him even though he was Chinese. Seeing the Khan in such a good mood all had turned towards the young man, hoping that he would get a good reward.

"The Khan is so good to me," said Guo Jing, "and my mother has everything that she needs, you don't need to trouble yourself giving me a reward..."

"That is a good example of filial piety," Temujin said. "You always think about your mother first... But for yourself, what do you wish? Speak without fear."

Guo Jing thought an instant, and then knelt before Temujin. "I don't want anything for me, but I have a wish for someone else."

"What is it?" asked Temujin.

"Dukhsh, the son of Senggum, is cruel and mean. If Hua Zheng marries him, she will be very unhappy. I implore the Khan to not give her in marriage to that dishonorable man."

Temujin was disconcerted at first, but then exploded in laughter. "These are indeed the wishes of a child! How could this be possible? I am going to give you a very precious object." From his belt he removed a dagger which he handed to Guo Jing. All the officers displayed their admiration and appreciation noisily; it was Temujin's favored weapon with which he had killed innumerable enemies. If he had not made a solemn promise, he would never have parted with it. "Take my golden dagger," Temujin said, "and kill some enemies for me."

"I will," Guo Jing answered. Guo Jing thanked him and took the dagger. He had often seen it on the Khan's belt, but it was the first time that he examined it closely. The girdle was of pure gold, and the end of the handle was decorated with the grinning head of a tiger, also in gold.

Hua Zheng, exploding in sobs, bounded onto her horse and left at full speed. Temujin had a hard heart, but he could not stop sighing while thinking of his daughter's pain. He then took the eagles to the camp, followed by his officers and soldiers.

After the crowd dispersed, Guo Jing drew the dagger and felt the coldness of the blade. He had the impression he could see traces of blood on it. It was a short massive weapon, and it impressed him because it had killed many people! He moved it about for a moment and then put it back in its sheath, which he attached to his belt. Then he drew his sword and started practicing the 'Sword of the Yue Maiden' again. In spite of all his efforts, he didn't succeed in executing the movements of 'Branch Hits the White Gorilla' correctly. He either didn't jump sufficiently high or he didn't

have the time to make the turns. The more frustrated he got, the less he controlled his breathing; the result was catastrophic and he was sweating heavily. Suddenly, he heard a galloping horse; it was Hua Zheng coming back.

She stopped not far from him, got off the horse and lay down on the grass with her chin on her hand, to watch Guo Jing train. Seeing that he seemed to be suffering a lot, she shouted to him, "Stop, rest for a while."

"Don't disturb me," Guo Jing retorted, "I don't have the time to chat with you."

Hua Zheng didn't say anything else, but observed him while smiling. Then, she took a handkerchief from her pocket, made two knots in it, and threw it to him. "Wipe off the sweat with it!"

Guo Jing grumbled, but didn't look up to catch it, and continued to train.

After a little while, she asked, "You asked dad to not marry me to Dukhsh. Why?"

"Dukhsh is very mean. He once released leopards so that they could devour your brother Tolui. If you marry him, maybe he will beat you..."

"If he beats me, you will come to defend me!"

"But," thought Guo Jing, speechless, "how would that be possible?"

"If I don't marry him, who WILL marry me?" Hua Zheng said with a tender look.

"I don't know," Guo Jing said, shaking his head.



"Pah!" Hua Zheng said, while the face that had blushed earlier became suddenly furious. "You never know anything!"

Some moments later, she softened her attitude. Then they heard the eaglets, on the summit of the cliff, calling. Loud screeches sounded in the sky; it was the second white eagle coming back after having been drawn afar by the black eagles. From the heights, it saw its beloved companion dead on the cliff; then it flew like a white cloud in concentric circles.

Guo Jing stopped and raised his head. The white eagle didn't stop whirling, still uttering screeches of pain.

"Watch," Hua Zheng said, "the eagle is unhappy!"

"Yes," Guo Jing agreed, "it must be very sad."

The eagle uttered a long call and suddenly flew off up towards the highest clouds.

"Why does it go up so high?" Hua Zheng wondered.

Suddenly the eagle came down again like an arrow and dove onto the cliff, where it smashed itself. Horrified, Guo Jing and Hua Zheng uttered a scream of surprise, and didn't know what to say.

Suddenly, they heard a loud voice behind them saying, "Admirable...admirable."

They turned around and saw a white-haired Taoist and with a red-face. His clothing was strange and to his hair were attached three high adornments. He wore the immaculate dress of a Taoist, which was a surprising sight on this windy and dusty plain. Since he had spoken in Chinese, Hua Zheng didn't understand him and lost interest.

"The two eaglets lost their father and mother," she said, looking up at the top of the cliff, "how will they survive now?"

The extremely steep cliff reached up into the sky, and it looked nearly impossible to climb. Obviously, the two eaglets, which had not yet learned to fly, were going to die of hunger in their nest.

"Unless," said Guo Jing, "someone has wings and flies there, it is the only way to save them..." He collected his sword and started to practice. In spite of all his efforts, he still didn't manage to execute the movements; just as he began to despair, he heard a voice behind him say coldly, "If you keep doing it that way, you will still be dragging your sword a hundred years from now, and you won't progress as much as a hair!"

Guo Jing turned around; it was the Taoist with the three adornments.

"What did you say?" he asked.

The man smiled, didn't answer, and suddenly advanced. Guo Jing felt like his arm was paralyzed and, without knowing how, saw his sword, that he had held firmly, in the hand of the Taoist! Zhu Cong had already taught him the technique 'To Seize a Blade with the Bare Hand'; even though he hadn't mastered it entirely, he had assimilated the principles of it. However, this time, he didn't have the slightest idea as to how the Taoist did it. Frightened, he moved back three steps. He stood in front of Hua Zheng to protect her and drew Temujin's knife.

"Watch closely!" the Taoist shouted.

He jumped as if it was nothing special, made six or seven turns with the sword, before softly landing again on his feet.

Guo Jing was awestruck.

The man threw the sword on the ground and said while laughing, "The white eagle was quite admirable, it is necessary to save its offspring!"

He sprang toward the cliff and began climbing at full speed using his feet and hands, as agile as a monkey and as light as a bird. The slope rose very steeply and was, in part, as straight as a wall. But the slightest bump was sufficient for him to climb up higher. Even when the rock appeared smooth as a mirror, he climbed like a lizard.

Guo Jing and Hua Zheng were very anxious; if he slipped, the fall would definitely kill him. The silhouette became smaller and smaller and gave the impression he was about to enter the clouds. The girl closed her eyes, afraid of seeing what could happen: "Where is he now?" she asked.

"He's nearly at the summit," Guo Jing answered. "There, he made it!"

Opening her eyes, she saw the Taoist fly off as if he was going to fall and let out a scream of fright. In fact, when he reached the summit, the large sleeves of his robe floated in the violent wind that blew there. One had the impression, seen from below, that he was a huge bird.

The man slipped his hand into the nest, caught the two eaglets and put them against his chest. Then, back to the slope he went, where he let himself slip, grabbing a hand on a bump here or giving a kick from time to time, to slow his fall, and reached the ground very quickly.

Guo Jing and Hua Zheng ran towards him. He took the eaglets and said to the girl, in Mongolian, "Will you take good care of them?"

“Yes, yes, yes,” she answered quickly. Hua Zheng, surprised and delighted, stretched out her hands.

“Be careful of their beaks,” warned the Taoist, “they are small, but their bite is dangerous...”

Hua Zheng undid her belt and attached it to the legs of the fledglings. Then she held them against herself, delighted, “I am going to look for meat to feed them.”

“Wait,” the Taoist said. “If you want the eaglets, you must promise me one thing.”

“What?”

“You must not tell anyone that I climbed the cliff to catch the birds.”

“Okay,” Hua Zheng said joyfully. “That’s easy. I won’t tell anyone.”

“While they are growing,” warned the Taoist while smiling, “these two white eagles will become aggressive. Be very careful while feeding them!”

Happy, she told Guo Jing, “Each of us will have one, and it will be me who keeps them in the meantime, okay?”

Guo Jing nodded his head. Hua Zheng got on her horse and happily rode off.

The young man stayed immobile, as if hypnotized, reviewing in his head the ease of the movements of the Taoist executing ‘The Branch Hits the White Gorilla’. The man grabbed the sword and kindly offered it to him and turned on his heels. Seeing that he was leaving, Guo Jing said, in panic:

“You... please... Don’t leave...”

"Why not?" asked the Taoist.

Guo Jing scratched his head, not knowing what to say. Suddenly, he kowtowed, knocking the ground with his forehead, without stopping.

"Why do you prostrate yourself before me?" the Taoist asked.

There was a deep ache in Guo Jing's heart. Seeing the kind face of the Taoist, he felt as if he had met a relative with whom he was able to confide. Suddenly, two big tears rolled down his cheeks and he said while choking back sobs. "Me... Me... I am very dumb, I can't manage to learn martial arts, and I am a disappointment to my six Shifus, to whom I owe everything..."

"What are you going to do?" the Taoist asked.

"I give all of myself, day and night, and still I don't manage to do it properly... I really can't manage to learn it..."

"Do you want me to show you a way?" he asked.

"Yes, please!" replied Guo Jing, kowtowing again.

The Taoist smiled, "It seems to me that you are full of sincerity. Very well, let's meet each other again in three days; we will meet on the fifteenth day of the month. When the moon is full, I will wait for you at the summit of the cliff. But you must not tell anyone!" Then he left.

"But I won't be able to climb up there," Guo Jing protested in a rush.

The Taoist didn't answer and it appeared, as he departed, that his feet didn't touch the ground at all, and he was already far away.

"He made that promise on purpose to embarrass me; he doesn't want to teach me." Then he said himself, "I am not yet without a Shifu and my six Shifus have caused themselves much pain trying to teach me; it's me that is stupid, what choices do I have ? This Senior is probably very strong, but I won't be able to learn any of what he knows from him anyway; why should I even try?" He contemplated the top of the cliff, and then he tried to not think more about it. He took his sword, and repeated the moves again and again of 'The Branch Hits the White Gorilla', until sunset, when hunger urged him to go back home.

Three days passed in the blink of an eye. That afternoon, Han Baoju taught him the 'Whip of the Golden Dragon'. This kind of flexible weapon required particularly close attention; if one didn't master all the refinements of it, not only would you not reach the enemy, but you risked getting injured by it yourself. Guo Jing, of course, made a false move, and "slash", the whip turned against him, striking him on the head causing a big bump. Han Baoju, who had a legendary harsh character, immediately gave him a slap. Guo Jing didn't dare to shy away and continued to practice. Seeing him putting in a lot of effort, Han Baoju regretted having lost his temper. Even though his pupil made mistakes several more times, the master didn't scold him again. He showed him five more movements, encouraged him, and recommended that he train by himself. Then he left on his horse.

To practice the 'Whip of the Golden Dragon' wasn't an easy task. After having executed the set of the sequences about ten times, Guo Jing's forehead, arms, and thighs were covered with blue welts. Tired and aching all over, he fell asleep on the grass. When he woke up, the moon had appeared from behind the mountains. He felt burning pains

on his whole body and notably on the cheek, where Han Baoju had slapped him.

Contemplating the top of the cliff, he had suddenly a burst of self-esteem, "If the Taoist can climb up there, why not me?" he thought. Clenching his teeth, he ran to the cliff and began to climb it, clinging onto the plants that grew there, slowly going up. At the end of six or seven zhangs, [1 zhang = 3.3 meters / approx. 11ft] the cliff became completely smooth without any vegetation or bumps to grasp. How could he advance further in these conditions? He gritted his teeth, tried two times, but his foot always slipped, and he almost fell. Understanding that any new attempt would be in vain, he wanted to go back down again. When he glanced behind him, he was terrified! He had forced himself to follow this path of ascent, and now found his feet were unable to use the same support points on the way down. If he jumped, he would certainly smash himself below!

Caught in a desperate situation, the words of his Fourth Shifu came to mind, "In this world, there's nothing impossible to the men of good will." Since death stared at him from all sides, rather than remain in an untenable position, it was better to continue. He drew his dagger and dug two small holes, in which he slowly placed one foot and steadied himself, and then the other. He rose thus a few more inches. Then he continued to dig in the wall, making more hand and footholds, rising laboriously a few zhangs. Because of the difficulty of the task, his head started to spin and his limbs burned with exhaustion.

He stopped to clear his mind, holding closely to the wall, controlling his breathing. Then he wondered how many holes it would take before arriving at the summit. As strong as his dagger was, it would probably be able to dig ten more holes, and then it would break. Since he had made it this far, he could no longer go back. After a brief rest, he

got ready to dig again; then he heard a burst of laughter coming from the summit of the cliff.

Not daring to lean backward to look, he remained, nose against the smooth wall of the cliff, wondering who this laugh came from. Then he saw a thick rope slip down and stop next to him. He heard the voice of the Taoist saying, "Tie the rope around your waist, I will pull you up."

Delighted, Guo Jing sheathed his dagger. Holding tightly with his left hand, he took the rope with his right hand and wrapped it around his waist two times and made two knots.

"Did you tie it firmly?" the Taoist shouted.

"It's done," Guo Jing said.

The Taoist seemed to not have heard. "Did you tie it?" He asked again.

"It's done," Guo Jing repeated, with out any response.

Some instants later, the Taoist laughed again and said. "Ah, I forgot...your breathing is not yet sufficiently powerful, your voice cannot carry as far as mine. If you tied it well, pull three times on the rope!"

Guo Jing obeyed and pulled three times. Suddenly, the rope grew taught; his body flew up toward the summit of the cliff. He knew that the Taoist was going to pull it, but not with such speed. In the blink of an eye, he landed again on his feet, right in front of the old man.

He knelt and got ready to kowtow, but the Taoist held his arm. "Three days ago, you kowtowed more than a hundred times, it is more than enough! You are a child with good character!"



On the summit of the cliff was flat ground covered with snow. The Taoist showed him two big round rocks that looked vaguely like stools, "Sit there."

"I will remain standing to serve you, Shifu," Guo Jing said.

"You don't belong to my school," the Taoist said, still smiling. "I am not your Master, and you are not my disciple. You may sit."

Guo Jing, perplexed, obeyed and sat down.

"Your six Shifus," the old man continued, "are well known in the martial arts realm. I don't know them personally, but I've always felt a lot of admiration for them. It would be more than enough for you to acquire the techniques of one of them to make yourself a name in the Jianghu. It is not due to a lack of effort on your part, yet, during the past ten years, you haven't progressed that much. Do you know why?"

"It is because I am too dumb. My Shifus have tried very hard to teach me the best they could, but it didn't help."

"It's not really because of you," the Taoist said. "It's, as the popular saying goes, 'If those that teach don't know how to teach, then those that try to learn won't learn anything'!"

"Shif... uh, I don't understand what you're saying."

"If we look only to the core martial arts, the level to which you've arrived is not negligible. At the time of your first real fight since the beginning of your training, when you were beaten by the Taoist youth, you questioned yourself and thought it was impossible for you to beat him. On this point, however, you are completely mistaken!"

"How does he know of this matter?" Guo Jing wondered.

“This Taoist youth made you do a somersault, but he did it with a trick. Comparing basic techniques, it’s not at all certain that he surpasses you. Besides, your six Shifus are probably as strong as I am, that’s why I cannot teach you martial arts.”

“He’s right,” Guo Jing thought. “My six Shifus are very strong, it’s me that’s too dumb.”

“Your seven Shifus made a bet,” continued the Taoist. “If I teach you some martial arts, your masters will be sad when they learn of it. They are brave, and place a lot of importance on loyalty and honor. They would refuse to accept any sort of unfair advantage in a bet.”

“What bet?” Guo Jing wondered.

“So you don’t know about it then? Well, if your masters didn't tell you anything about it yet, it’s because you don't have to know about it at the present time. During the next two years, they will certainly explain it to you in detail. Let's look at it this way: you are full of sincerity, and it seems that our meeting was written in destiny. I am going to teach you some methods of breathing, of sitting down, of walking and sleeping.”

The astonishment Guo Jing felt knew no boundaries. “To ‘breathe, to sit down, to walk, to sleep’,” he thought to himself, “I know how to do that already, why would I have to learn it again?” He thought of a lot of questions, but didn't say anything.

“Clear the snow from this big rock,” the Taoist ordered, “you will be able to sleep there.”

Guo Jing thought it strange, but obeyed. He swept off the layer of snow and lay down on the rock.

"Not like that," the Taoist said. "If it was just sleeping like that, I wouldn't need to teach it to you. Here are four formulae, remember them well: 'When the thought fades, the feelings will be forgotten'; 'When the body empties, the breath will circulate'; 'When the heart dies, the mind will live'; 'When the sun rises, the darkness will vanish'."

Guo Jing repeated the formulae several times to learn them by heart, but he didn't understand the meaning of them.

"Before sleeping," the Taoist continued, "it's necessary to clear the mind, letting no thoughts or preoccupations remain there. Then, it is necessary to compose the body, while lying on your side, and to breathe in a continuous way through the nose, so that the soul doesn't wander inside and the mind doesn't go outside."

And so he taught Guo Jing breathing and the mastery of the breath, the technique of meditating and of eliminating worries.

Guo Jing did what the Taoist explained to him. In the beginning, his thoughts stayed chaotic and difficult to control. But after applying the breathing method, exhaling and inhaling deeply, after a certain time, he slowly felt his heart calm down, and a slow breath brought slowly into his 'dan tian' (the area between the groin and the navel) brought a warm feeling. An icy wind blew on the summit of the cliff, but he didn't feel any need to resist it. He remained immobile, stretched out on his side, for close to an hour, before feeling some "ants" in his limbs. The Taoist, who was sitting cross legged in front of him, practicing meditation, opened his eyes, "Now," said the Taoist, "you can fall asleep."

Guo Jing obeyed and fell asleep. When he woke up, the rays of the sun had begun to radiate from the east. The Taoist let

him down the cliff attached to the rope, telling him to come back this evening. He reminded him not to speak of it with anyone.

Guo Jing returned that evening and the Taoist brought him up with the same rope. During his practice with the six Shifus, he often did not go back home at night, but his mother didn't worry about him.

And so he went in the evening and left at dawn, practicing meditation and the mastery of breathing all night on the summit of the cliff. It was strange; the Taoist hadn't taught him any movements at all, not even the smallest sequence, and yet, in his daily practices, he became lighter and faster. Six months later, the movements that he hadn't managed to do before, now were executed perfectly. The sequences that he had never completed some months ago were executed with speed and precision. The 'Six Freaks of Jiangnan' believed that, with age and the regular practice, he was finally open to learning martial arts. They no longer felt the frustration they had at the beginning of his training.

Every evening, when he arrived at the cliff, the Taoist climbed with him, showing him how to use his breathing and his strength. They went up together until he was incapable of continuing, then the Taoist rushed to the summit and raised him with the rope. With the passing of the months, the young man climbed more and more quickly, and higher and higher. The steps once so difficult were cleared with only one jump! Only some particularly difficult places still required the help of the rope.

Another year passed, and only a few months remained before the competition. The 'Six Freaks of the Jiangnan' spoke of this event as though it was going to change the world of martial arts and attract the attention of all the brave heroes in the country. Observing Guo Jing's lightning

progress, the Six felt sure to win, and the idea of returning to their home in Jiangnan filled them with joy. However, they still hadn't explained to Guo Jing the reasons for this competition.

One morning, Nan Xiren said to Guo Jing, "Jing'er, in these last few months, you've mastered the weapons. It may be that you still lack enough practice fighting with bare hands. Today, we are going to work the palms more.

Guo Jing nodded his head.

They arrived at the place where they usually trained. Nan Xiren got ready to begin the lesson when they suddenly saw clouds of dust rising not far away, accompanied by screams and neighs. A herd of horses approached at a fast gallop and the beasts were agitated; the Mongol who herded them had problems retaining control of them with his whip.

Just when they'd barely settled down, one could suddenly see, coming from the west, a small red horse, with the hair the color of fire. It was speeding along in the herd, harassing it with hoofs and bites, before disappearing northward at the speed of the wind. Then, the red tornado came back in the blink of an eye, provoking a considerable tumult in the herd again. Furious, the herders tried to capture this spoilsport, but the horse was so fast that it was impossible to catch it. In an instant, the horse had moved off and stood several zhangs away, neighing proudly, as if he was very happy with the shambles he'd caused. The Mongols didn't know whether to laugh or be angry. When the small horse charged in for the third time, several guards sent arrows in its direction, but he was so astute and fast that he departed before the projectiles reached it. An expert in martial arts couldn't have done it any better!

The 'Six Freaks', along with Guo Jing, were fascinated. Even Han Baoju, who loved horses above all else, had never seen such a magnificent and fast animal. His own horse, 'Wind Chaser', had rare speed, unequaled even in Mongolia. However, the small red horse surpassed them all. Han asked the herders where this marvel came from.

"This wild horse," answered a herder, "comes from some mountains. We first saw it a few days ago, and found it so beautiful that we wanted to capture it, but did not succeed. Our attempt put it in a mean mood and, for these past few days, it keeps coming to bother us."

"It is not a horse," said a very serious old horse herder.

"What is it then?" Han Baoju wondered.

"It is a transformed celestial dragon, we shouldn't bother him!"

"A dragon transformed into a horse!" another horse herder mocked. "What nonsense!"

"What do you know of it? I've kept horses for several years, but I never saw an animal as fabulous as this one, ever!" He had not finished speaking when the small red horse sped again into the herd.

The equestrian arts of Han Baoju, nicknamed the 'Horse God', were remarkable. Even the Mongols, who constantly lived in the saddle, recognized his superiority. Seeing that the small horse had come back, and knowing well which way he was going to leave, he stood in a strategic position and awaited the passage of the animal. When it approached, he suddenly jumped, a very calculated jump, so that he should have managed to straddle the beast. He had tamed so many stubborn horses in his life that he had the conviction that once on its back, he wouldn't fall.

However, in a split second, the small red horse accelerated, making Han Baoju miss his mark. Furious, he ran after him, but how could he have caught up with such a fast animal?

Suddenly, someone jumped and seized the mane of the horse with his left hand. Surprised, the horse galloped even faster. Still clutching the horse's mane, the man let himself be pulled along with his body off the ground. The spectators noisily applauded.

Astonished and delighted, the 'Six Freaks' saw that it was Guo Jing that was being cheered!

"But where," Zhu Cong asked, "did he learn a lightness technique that sophisticated?"

"Our Jing'er has made immense progresses lately," Han Xiaoying said. "Could it be his dead father that guides him from the heavens? Or would it be Fifth brother?..."

How could they have known that, for the past two training years, the Taoist of the three adornments had taught him every evening, on the cliff summit, the art and mastery of breathing? Even though he didn't teach him any fighting skills, he had initiated him into the superior art of neigong.

[Neigong could be regarded as a form of internal martial arts involving controlled breathing, meditation and the awareness of what's happening inside one's own body and to some extent controlling it. It can be used as an aid in the recovery of one's health from illness or injury and improves the skills of external types of martial arts.]

Every evening, when he climbed and descended the cliff, Guo Jing practiced, without the knowledge of his teachers, a very subtle lightness technique called the 'Flight of the Golden Eagle'. Having a naturally simple and confident mind, he was completely unconscious of what he had

learned from the Taoist. His progress in the mastery of his internal energy and in this technique of the 'Flight of the Golden Eagle' only appeared when he practiced lightness techniques with Zhu Cong, Quan Jinfa or Han Xiaoying. He didn't realize it, and the 'Six Freaks' were pleasantly surprised at his improved performance, without suspecting the truth.

Observing the neigong of their disciple and his suppleness that didn't corresponded at all to what they had taught him, they looked on in astonishment, suspecting that the young man had another master.

Guo Jing suddenly executed a somersault in the air and dropped astride the horse. The horse reared, kicked with its hind legs and bounded to all sides as if possessed! But the boy clamped down with his thighs and didn't allow himself to be tossed off.

Han Baoju shouted some instructions to him and told him some tricks to master the horse, which ran with renewed vigor for more than an hour, apparently untiring.

His audience was in awe: the old horse herder knelt and whispered some prayers, imploring the sky not to punish the man for having offended the 'Dragon Horse', before shouting to Guo Jing to let him go. But he didn't hear a thing, and stayed glued to the horse as if he was attached by a rope, reacting to all of its movements smoothly.

"Come down off that horse," Han Xiaoying shouted. "Let your Third Shifu replace you..."

"Absolutely not!" protested Han Baoju. "Changing the trainer now would risk all of the work he has done up to now!"



He knew very well that such a stallion had to have a strong character. If someone managed to tame it, it would respect its master and would stay forever faithful to him. But if more than one tried to overcome it, it would rather die than submit!

Guo Jing also had an obstinate character. When he began to get tired, he slipped his arms around the neck of the horse and began to tighten them, making use of his internal energy. The animal bounded, jumped, and shook itself in all directions, without getting rid of this pressure that was suffocating it. It then knew that it had met its master, and stopped.

"Bravo!" exclaimed Han Baoju, delighted. "That's it! You have succeeded!" Fearing that the horse would run away again, Guo Jing didn't dare dismount. "You can come down," Han Baoju reassured him. "Now it will follow you all of your life. Even if you wanted to get rid of it you wouldn't be able to..."

The young man jumped to the ground. The horse licked his hand, showing affection that made everyone there laugh. A guard approached it a little too closely and the animal gave him a kick that made him somersault. Guo Jing led it to the water, to wash it and calm it down.

Since this session of horse breaking had tired him a lot, the Six released him from practice for now; but doubts still troubled them.

After the lunch, Guo Jing came into the ger of his masters. "Jing'er," Quan Jinfa said, "I would like to see your practice of the 'Crunching Mountains' palm strokes."

"Here, in the ger?"

“Yes. One can meet enemies in any place; it’s necessary to train to fight even in closed spaces.” He feinted with the left, and delivered a stroke with his right fist.

Guo Jing, respecting the rule of courtesy due to elders, defended three movements before responding. Quan Jinfa then attacked with violence. Suddenly his fists hit the young man’s chest, with a movement named ‘Penetrating Deeply in the Lair of the Tiger’. It was no longer a practice stroke, but a deadly, violent and heavy one, used to kill! Panicked, Guo Jing wanted to move back, but he already had his back against the wall of the ger. Trying to protect himself when confronted with danger is a natural reaction especially since he had a rather slow mind. Without even thinking about it, he turned his left arm, and blocked the attack of Quan by repulsing his arms. The fists had already touched his chest, when Quan realized with surprise, that it was as soft as cotton, without any resistance. Then he was repulsed with strength, and his arms were afflicted by a jolting pain; he moved back three steps before recovering his balance.

Guo Jing was speechless and knelt before saying, “I probably did something that I shouldn’t have,” he exclaimed, “I accept the punishment of the Sixth Shifu!” Afraid and surprised, he wondered what crime he could have committed that was worthy of his master’s anger, to the point of wanting to kill him!

Ke Zhen’E and the others got up, all with stern expressions. “You train with someone besides us,” Zhu Cong said. “Why did you hide it from us? If Sixth Shifu hadn’t tested you like that, you would have continued to lie to us, am I wrong?”

“There is only master Jebe,” Guo Jing said, “who teaches me the bow and the spear!”

“Do you dare lie to us again?” an angry Zhu Cong said, with a severe look.

“I would not dare to lie to my Shifus ever!” Guo Jing said with his eyes full of tears.

“Then where did you learn this mastery of neigong?” Zhu Cong insisted. “Now that you have the support of a powerful master, you no longer have any respect for us!”

“Neigong?” Guo Jing wondered. “But I don't have a neigong!”

“Pfui!” Zhu Cong spat, still doubtful. He moved his index finger toward a location situated two inches below the sternum, named ‘Tail of Turtledove’. A stroke to this essential point on the body induces immediate unconsciousness. Guo Jing didn't dare to avoid or to defend against it and remained immobile. However, he had practiced for almost two years with the Taoist of the three adornments and, even though he didn't know it himself, his body was filled with internal energy. On contact with Zhu Cong's finger, his flesh naturally retracted and then expanded itself, repulsing the finger. The stroke still hit the point effectively, but caused only a certain amount of pain, without succeeding in affecting that point on the meridian. Zhu Cong had not used all of his strength, but Guo Jing's internal energy had succeeded in neutralizing him. When he realized it he was astonished and angry. “And that's not neigong?” he shouted.

“Could the Taoist master have taught me neigong?” wondered Guo Jing finally understanding. He said, “During these past two years, someone came, every evening, to teach me how to breathe, to sit and meditate and to sleep. I found it funny, but I followed his instructions. But he didn't teach me any techniques, but he did tell me to not talk of it

with anyone. Since I thought that there wasn't anything wrong with it and that it didn't affect my practicing, I didn't speak of it to any of you. I recognize my mistake; I won't go to him anymore." He kowtowed.

The Six looked at each other and thought, "The young man seems sincere, and he doesn't seem to be lying."

"Don't you know what the neigong is?" Han Xiaoying asked.

"I really don't know what the neigong is!" Guo Jing said. "He told me to sit and meditate and to breathe slowly, without thinking about anything while concentrating only on the way the breath circulates inside the body. In the beginning I couldn't manage to do it, but lately I've had the impression that, inside me, there was something like a hot small mouse running through all of my body; it was very funny."

The Six were surprised and delighted at the same time, to see that this simple-minded kid had succeeded in reaching such a level. This was not very easy, especially for him.

In fact, Guo Jing did have a simple mind. Compared to so-called intelligent people, he didn't have a head cluttered full of difficult and meandering thoughts to bother him. His type of mind encouraged progress in the acquirement of neigong. Thus, in barely two years, he had succeeded in reaching this level.

"Who taught it to you?" Zhu Cong asked.

"He doesn't want me to say his name," answered Guo Jing. "He said that the kung fu of my Shifus is not lower than his, and that's why he cannot teach me martial arts and cannot be my Shifu. He made me swear to not ever describe his appearance to anyone."

The Six Freaks were more and more astonished. In the beginning, they thought to themselves that Guo Jing had by luck met an expert, and were delighted for him. But this individual appeared so mysterious that they were now suspicious. With a gesture, Zhu Cong asked Guo Jing to leave.

"I won't dare go and amuse myself with him anymore," the young man said.

"You can go," reassured Zhu Cong. "We are not angry with you, but you don't need to tell him that we know."

Guo Jing acquiesced and, seeing that his masters weren't annoyed anymore, happily left. Outside of the ger, he saw Hua Zheng with the two white eagles, which had grown a lot. Standing next to her, they were nearly as tall as her.

"Come quickly," Hua Zheng said, "I've been waiting for you a long time."

One of the eagles fluttered over and came to perch on Guo Jing's shoulder. "A while ago," he said, "I tamed a small red horse that runs with incredible speed! I don't know if it will let you mount it..."

"If it doesn't let me," said Hua Zheng, "I'll slaughter it!"

"No you won't!"

The two young people, hand in hand, ran on the plain to have fun with their horses and eagles.

## **Chapter 6 - Mysterious Happenings on the Summit of the Cliff**

**Translated by Strunf, Patudo, Taihan and Dugu  
Seeking a Win**



*Guo Jing shot three arrows with a rush of wind, killing the three closest pursuing soldiers, before interposing himself between the pursuers and the pursued. While continuing to shoot arrows he killed one more pursuing soldier. In the meantime Jebe had arrived and his arrows flew as well, swift and deadly.*

Remaining in the ger, the Six quietly conferred with each other. "This man taught a superior neigong to our Jing'er," Han Xiaoying said. "He can't possibly want to hurt him..."

"Then why doesn't he want us to know about it?" Quan Jinfa asked. "And why he doesn't tell to our Jing'er that it's neigong that he's teaching him.

"I fear that he's someone that we know," Zhu Cong said.

"Someone we know?" Han Xiaoying wondered. "If it's not a friend, it can only be an enemy!"

"Amongst our friends," Quan Jinfa confirmed, "no one has kung fu this exceptional."

"But if it is an enemy," Han Xiaoying pursued, "what reason would he have to teach our Jing'er?"

"Maybe there is a devilish plan behind it." Ke Zhen'E said with a cold voice. The others froze thinking about his words.

"Tonight," Zhu Cong said, "Sixth brother and I will follow Jing'er discreetly to see who the expert is." The five approved.

That night, Zhu Cong and Quan Jinfa hid themselves not far from Guo Jing and his mother's ger. After a half-hour wait, they heard the young man say in a high voice, "I'm going, mom!" He left the ger, discreetly followed by his two masters, who were surprised at the speed of his leaving.

Fortunately, there weren't many obstacles on the arid plain and they could see him from afar. Arriving at the bottom of the cliff, he climbed it without slowing down. By this time, Guo Jing had made huge progress in his lightness technique. Since he climbed the cliff every evening, he didn't need the help of the Taoist anymore and went to the top very quickly. Zhu Cong and Quan Jinfa were more and more astonished and stood for a long time in silence until the other 'Freaks' arrived. Afraid of falling into the hands of enemies, they brought their weapons and their hidden projectiles. Zhu Cong explained that Guo Jing was already up the cliff.

Han Xiaoying raised her head and saw the summit of the cliff lost in the clouds and shivered. "We'll have a difficult time getting up there," she said.

"Let's hide in the bushes," Ke Zhen'E said, "we'll wait for them to come down again." The other five agreed. Han Xiaoying thought about the night ten years ago when they fought the 'Twin Killers of the Dark Winds'. She and her six brothers hid, waiting for enemies. It was as cold a night as this one and the wind cut to the bone. The lonely moon, the desolate hill, the swirling of sand, and the silence of the night only broken by some distant sounds... The only difference was that now she wouldn't see Zhang Ahsheng and his always smiling face. She felt sadness in her heart.

The hours passed and they didn't notice any movement on the cliff. Day broke and there was still no trace of Guo Jing or of his mysterious teacher. They tried looking up but couldn't see anything.

"Sixth brother," Zhu Cong said, "Let's see what's up there."

"Will we be able to climb it?" Han Baoju asked.



"I'm not sure; we'll only know after we try," Zhu Cong said. After running back to the ger, he returned bringing back two long ropes, two axes and several big nails. Quan Jinfa and Zhu Cong attached themselves to each other with the rope and began the climb. They dug some holes and planted the nails in them in order to provide sure hand and foot-holds. Sweating, they finally arrived on the summit. Hardly had they put their feet on the top of the cliff when they exclaimed loudly and became pale with fear.

Next to a big rock, they saw nine white skulls perfectly stacked - five at the base, three in the middle and one on the top. It was identical to the arrangement once made by the 'Twin Killers of the Dark Winds'. Examining the skulls, they saw that each also had the five holes in the forehead. The edges of the holes were very clean and without any breaks as if cut with a blade. Obviously, the power of the fingers of the 'Killer' had increased considerably when compared to the ones they had seen ten years ago. With their hearts thumping like drums they cautiously examined the surroundings, but saw nothing else unusual. Then they climbed down to tell the others what they had seen. Seeing the look on their faces, Han Baoju was worried.

"It's Mei Chaofeng!" Zhu Cong said. The other four froze.

"And our Jing'er?..." Han Xiaoying asked.

"They must have come down the other side," Quan Jinfa answered. Then he told them what they had seen.

"Who would have guessed," Ke Zhen'E sighed, "that for eighteen years, all of our efforts only served to feed a snake amongst us!"

"Jing'er is an honest, straight-forward boy and good as gold," Han Xiaoying disagreed, "he would never betray us."

"Honest and straight-forward?" Ke Zhen'E sneered. "How could he learn those martial arts from that witch for two years and not tell us anything?" Han Xiaoying stayed uneasily silent, not knowing what to say.

"Unless," Han Baoju said, "a blind Mei Chaofeng wants to use Jing'er to harm us?"

"That's probably what she's planning," Zhu Cong confirmed.

"Even if Jing'er has bad intentions," Han Xiaoying protested, "he would never agree to betray us like that!"

"Maybe," Quan Jinfa suggested, "the witch hasn't decided when the moment to inform him has come."

"Ok, let's admit," Han Baoju said, "That Jing'er's lightness technique is good and he has a good basis in neigong; but what of martial arts? He still is far behind us. Why didn't the witch teach him any techniques?"

"The witch only uses him," Ke Zhen'E explained, "She doesn't want to make him good! Didn't her husband die by Jing'er's hand?"

"That's it! That's it!" Zhu Cong exclaimed. "She wants us all to die by Jing'er's hand, and then she will kill him. That way full vengeance will be gained!" They all shivered, struck by the logic of this reasoning. Ke Zhen'E struck the ground with his staff and quietly said, "Let's go back and act as if we don't know anything. When Jing'er arrives, we will eliminate him. Afterward, when the witch arrives to train him, we will take care of her. Even though she may have become stronger than before, she can't see anything; with the six of us together, we should be able to get rid of her once and for all."

“Eliminate Jing’er?” Han Xiaoying exclaimed, frightened. “And what of the challenge we made with Qiu Chuji?”

“Which is more important,” Ke Zhen’E replied coldly, “to keep our lives safe or to go to that challenge?” All remained silent.

“No,” Nan Xiren suddenly said. “We can’t do it.”

“What can’t we do?” asked Han Baoju.

“We can’t eliminate him.” Nan Xiren said, shaking his head.

“I agree with the opinion of Fourth brother,” Han Xiaoying said. “It’s necessary to interrogate him in depth in order not to make an irreparable mistake.”

“The problem is too serious,” Quan Jinfa said. “If we hesitate and show the slightest weakness and he benefits from that to secretly betray us, what will happen to us?”

“If we don’t make the right decision,” Zhu Cong said, “the consequences may be terrifying. Do not forget that our adversary is Mei Chaofeng!”

“What do you think, Third brother?” Ke Zhen’E asked.

Han Baoju wasn’t sure which way to decide, but he saw tears in the eyes of Han Xiaoying. She seemed so sad: “I’ll take Fourth brother’s side,” Then he said, “I won’t ever be able to kill Jing’er.”

Thus, three ‘Freaks’ were of the opinion to use violence on Guo Jing; the other three wanted a more measured approach.

“If Fifth brother was still among us,” Zhu Cong sighed, “it would be possible for him to break this deadlock...”

Hearing him mention Zhang Ahsheng, Han Xiaoying was heart broken again. Holding back her tears, she quietly said, "How could we not want to avenge our Fifth brother? Let's obey our elder Brother's wish!"

"In that case," Ke Zhen'E said. "Let's go back to the camp."

Back in their ger, they stayed silent, the air of death surrounding them.

That night, when Guo Jing arrived at the summit of the cliff, the Taoist was already there. Seeing the young man, he spoke to him in a low voice and showed him something next to the big rock where they usually trained.

"Look!"

Guo Jing approached and saw in the moonlight the pile of nine skulls. He jumped back. "The 'Twin Killers of the Dark Winds'!" he said with a trembling voice. "They've come again!"

"You know of the 'Twin Killers of the Dark Winds'?" the Taoist asked. The young man told him of the terrifying fights that night, in the course of which his Fifth Shifu lost his life. He also told of how he frantically struck out with his knife and killed Chen Xuanfeng. The visions of that night were so vivid in his mind that he could not stop himself from shivering. When he stabbed 'Copper Corpse', he was very young, but the terrifying images had been engraved deeply in his memory.

"'Copper Corpse' caused so much suffering," sighed the Taoist, "yet he died by your hand!"

"My Shifus often speak of the 'Twin Killers of the Dark Winds'. My Third Shifu and Seventh Shifu say that 'Iron Corpse' should be dead... But Eldest Shifu always says: 'Not

for sure! Not for sure'! For these nine skulls to be here, 'Iron Corpse' can't be dead..." He shivered. "Did you see Mei Chaofeng?" he asked.

"I arrived here not long ago," the Taoist answered, "And I immediately noticed this pile of skulls. Has 'Iron Corpse' come here to take revenge on your Shifus and you?"

"The Eldest Shifu made her blind," Guo Jing said, "we are not afraid of her."

The Taoist took a skull in his hand and carefully examined it. "This person has a kung fu of terrifying power," he said while nodding his head. "I fear that your six Shifus are not strong enough to face her. Even if I lend them some assistance, we still may not defeat her!"

He was so sure of what he was saying, that Guo Jing was stunned. "Ten years ago," he said, "she was not blind and yet she did not succeed in defeating my seven Shifus. Today, we are eight... You... will you help us in this danger or not?"

"I've thought about it for a little while," the Taoist answered after an moment of silence, "but I don't understand how her fingers can be this powerful... As says the proverb: 'Those that wish you well don't come to find you, those that come to find you don't wish you well'! Since she dares to come to take revenge, she is very sure of her chances."

"What reason did she have for arranging the skulls here? Won't we be extra cautious after seeing them?"

"I imagine that it must be a part of the ritual of practicing the 'Nine Yin White Bone Claw'... Because it is so difficult to climb, she must think that no one comes to the summit of this cliff. By sheer luck, we stumbled on it!"

Fearing that Mei Chaofeng might already be going to fight his masters, Guo Jing said, "I am going to warn my Shifus."

"Well thought," the Taoist approved. "Tell them that you pass on a message from a good friend; they are to keep themselves aside for a while and take time to find the best solution... There's no reason to face her needlessly."

Guo Jing agreed; but at the very moment he was going to let himself slip down from the cliff, the Taoist grabbed him and jumped behind a large rock where they hid themselves. Guo Jing was going to ask him what was going on when the Taoist put his hand over his mouth. He shrank against the rock, not daring to make a sound, only risking a quick look.

A short time later, a shadow moved up the other side of the cliff. In the moonlight, long hair floated in the wind: it was Mei Chaofeng. The other side of the hill was even steeper than the cliff; because she was blind, she probably wouldn't have noticed the difference. That was a stroke of luck, because the 'Six Freaks' were hidden on this side. If she had come up here, she would not have failed to meet them, and they would be fighting already!

Mei Chaofeng turned around suddenly; a frightened Guo Jing lowered his head quickly. Then he remembered that she was blind, and he stood up slowly. He saw that she was sitting with her legs crossed on the big rock where he trained every day. Then she began breathing exercises. He now understood that this way of breathing and mastering the breath constituted the practice of the neigong. He felt a sudden appreciation for the Taoist's teaching.

A little later, he heard crackling coming from the body of Mei Chaofeng; at first occasional, then faster and faster, just like when one grills peanuts in a wok and they explode. The noise came from the inside of her body that remained

immobile. Guo Jing didn't know that it was a strange and superior form of the neigong, but he was still very impressed. The crackling lasted for a long time. Then the rhythm slowed until it stopped completely. Guo Jing saw her rise slowly, her left hand took something from her waist that she swung like a long silver snake. Startled at first, he then saw that it was a very long whip. The Golden Dragon Whip of his Shifu Han Baoju didn't exceed six feet, but this one had to be more than twenty feet long!

She turned around slowly and the light of the moon illuminated a face that still was very pretty. With her long hair and her eyes closed, she seemed sinister and frightening. In the silence, one could hear her sigh and whisper, "My bastard husband, could it be that in the Hell, you also think of me every day?" Holding her whip by its middle section, she quietly laughed and began to train. This whip seemed to dance in a curious way; the movements were slow and didn't make any noise. She made a stroke to the east, followed by an astounding one to the west; every strike more unbelievable than the last. Suddenly her hand slipped and caught the end of the whip so that all of its length reached a big rock. It wrapped around and raised it, as if it was a hand. Guo Jing was stunned by this. The whip, after flinging the rock far away, moved back towards his head. In the moonlight, he could see distinctly that the end of the whip held about ten very sharp hooks.

Guo Jing was already holding his knife. Seeing the whip coming his way, he was going to avoid the stroke, without even thinking about it. Then he felt his arm go numb and a hand pushed him to the ground. Like silvery lightning, the end of the whip passed above his head. Covered with a cold sweat he thought, "If my Taoist friend had not stopped me in time and my knife touched it, the whip would certainly have smashed my skull!" Fortunately, the Taoist did it

efficiently and quietly and Mei Chaofeng didn't notice anything.

She trained for a while, and then replaced the whip at her waist. From her bag she took a piece of cloth or leather that she unfolded and spread on the ground. She touched its surface, thought, then stood up to sketch some movements. She knelt again to feel the thing and to think again. Finally, she put it back in the bag and went away to the other side of the hill. Guo Jing sighed and stood up.

"We'll follow her," the Taoist said in a low voice. "Let's see what mischievous plan she's preparing for us!" He caught the young man by the belt and the two slowly slipped down from the hill. When they reached bottom, they saw Mei Chaofeng already far away to the north. The Taoist put his arm around Guo Jing who immediately felt a lot lighter and the two of them went at a great speed across the steppe, following 'Iron Corpse'. As dawn began, they saw a camp of several score large gers far away. Mei Chaofeng's shadow soon disappeared among them.

They accelerated their pace, avoiding the sentries and patrols, until they arrived at a big yellow ger. Guo Jing dropped to the ground and raised the flap of the ger slightly to take a look inside. He saw a man draw his large knife and strike a huge man, who collapsed to the floor. As he fell, his face was in the field of vision of the Taoist and Guo Jing. Guo Jing recognized him; he was Temujin's personal bodyguard! He was stunned. "How could it be that he came to be killed here?" He wondered raising the flap of the ger a little more. At this moment, the murderer turned around and Guo Jing recognized Senggum, the son of Ong Khan.

Senggum wiped the blade on his shoe's sole and said, "Now you don't have any more doubts, do you?"



"My brother Temujin is intelligent and courageous," answered a man, "this plan will not be easy to achieve." Guo Jing recognized him; it was Jamuka, Temujin's sworn brother.

"Since you like your sworn brother so much," Senggum sneered, "you could go and warn him!"

"You," Jamuka said, "are also my sworn brother. Your father has treated me with kindness, I won't betray you. Besides, Temujin has ambitions of absorbing my soldiers into his army, this I know very well. It is only because of our oath of brotherhood that I haven't broken our relationship yet."

"Could they be plotting against Temujin?" Guo Jing wondered. "How is it possible?"

"The one that takes the initiative always has the advantage," another man said. "If you wait for him to attack you, you are lost! After the victory, all of Temujin's goods, his herds, his wives, and his treasures, will come to Senggum. His men, on the other hand, will be incorporated into Jamuka's army. Accomplish that, and you will receive the title of 'Conqueror General of the North' from the Jin Empire."

Guo Jing could only see his back, so he crawled in a little further in order to see him better. He was clothed in a sumptuous yellow brocade tunic covered with sable. He knew the man, but he took a little time to remember his identity. "Ah yes, he's the Sixth Prince of the Jin Empire."

Jamuka seemed convinced by his words. "If my adoptive father, Ong Khan, gives me the order," he said, "I will obey."

"Since you put it like that," a very happy Senggum said, "if my father doesn't give the order, he will offend the Jin

Empire. In a little while, I will ask him, he won't be able to refuse the Sixth Prince."

"Soon," Wanyan Honglie continued, "the soldiers of the empire are going to descend on the south to conquer the Song. At that time, each of you, at the head of twenty thousand men, will be able to participate in the invasion. After the victory, others rewards will await you!"

"I've always heard," Senggum exclaimed joyfully, "that the south was a marvelous world, paved with gold, and where all women look like flowers. If the Sixth Prince takes us along, it would be perfect!"

"Nothing could be easier," Wanyan Honglie said, smiling, "I only fear that there might be too many beautiful women in the south and you won't see all of them!" They exploded in laughter.

"Now," pursued the prince, "tell me how you intend to take care of Temujin... In fact, I already asked him to help us to destroy the Song, but he refused. He's a clever man; we can't give him any reasons to doubt us. That is why we need to double our precautions."

At that moment, Guo Jing felt the Taoist pull him by the sleeve. He turned around, and saw Mei Chaofeng a little way off. She had caught someone and seemed to question him. "Whatever this witch's intentions," he thought, "my Shifus aren't threatened for now. First I am going to find out more about the plot against the Khan and then decide what to do." Then he turned again to the ger.

"He promised his daughter to my son," Senggum said, while looking at the body on the floor, "and I sent an emissary to agree to the date of the marriage. I'll ask him to come here to confer with my father. He will surely come without much of an escort. I will place some men in ambush along the

way; even if he had three heads and six arms, he won't escape alive!" He exploded in laughter.

Jamuka said, "As soon as Temujin is eliminated, our armies will invade his camp."

Guo Jing was filled with anger and concern: "How could the man's heart be so cruel, even to the point of plotting against his sworn brother!" He was about to listen again, but the Taoist pulled him out by his waist. He moved back and was lightly touched by Mei Chaofeng, who was leaving very quickly, holding someone by the neck. The Taoist took Guo Jing by the hand and the two moved away from the gers.

"She's trying to find out where your Shifus are." the Taoist said in a low voice. "We must go there immediately; otherwise it will be too late!" The two used their lightless technique and ran briskly. When they arrived at the ger of the 'Six Freaks', it was already close to noon.

The Taoist said, "I didn't want to be seen, that is why I ordered you not say anything about me to your Shifus. But now there is an emergency, and I cannot worry about such details any longer. Go to them and say that Ma Yu, of the Quanzhen [Absolute Perfection] Sect, asks to see the 'Six Valiant Heroes of Jiangnan'.

For two years, Guo Jing had seen him every evening, but it was only at this moment that he learned his name. Without knowing who precisely this character 'Ma Yu, of the Quanzhen Sect was, he obeyed and ran in the ger shouting, "Eldest Shifu!"

As soon as he entered, his wrists were clutched brutally, and he felt a sharp pain in his knees that made him fall to the floor. He saw that it was his Eldest Shifu, Ke Zhen'E, who had knocked him down with his heavy iron staff.

Completely terrified, he didn't even try to struggle or defend himself. He closed his eyes and waited for death. He heard the clank of two weapons clashing, and then felt someone throw themselves over him. He opened his eyes and saw his Seventh Shifu, Han Xiaoying, protecting him with her body, while shouting, "Older Brother, one moment please!" Her sword, with which she had blocked the stroke, had flown away.

Ke Zhen'E sighed, and thrust his staff down heavily on the floor, "Seventh Sister has always had too tender a heart!" Guo Jing then realized that Zhu Cong and Quan Jinfa had seized his wrists! He didn't understand anything anymore.

"Where is the person who teaches you neigong?" Ke Zhen'E asked with severity.

"Him ... He..." Guo Jing stammered. "He is... there... outside... He asks to see you..." Surprised at Mei Chaofeng's coming to find them in daylight, the 'Six Freaks' hurried outside, weapons in hand. But all they saw was a white-haired Taoist, hands joined in salute. There was no Mei Chaofeng!

"Where is the witch Mei Chaofeng?" Zhu Cong shouted, without releasing Guo Jing's wrist.

"I first saw her last night," the Taoist answered, "I fear that she may come soon!"

The Six looked at Ma Yu with puzzlement. He advanced briskly and greeted them. "For a long time I've admired the 'Six Valiant Heroes of Jiangnan'. Today, I finally meet them; it is a huge honor for me."

Zhu Cong, still holding Guo Jing, nodded his head in answer to the salute and said, "We don't dare to ask for the respected name of the Taoist master."

Guo Jing remembered that he had not announced the visitor and hastened to say, "He's Ma Yu, of the Quanzhen Sect."

The Six Freaks were hugely surprised. They knew that Ma Yu, who had the nickname 'Scarlet Sun', was the first disciple of the founder of the Quanzhen Sect, Wang Chongyang. After the death of the founder, Ma Yu became the Elder Master of the Sect. Qiu Chuji, 'Eternal Spring', was his younger martial brother. Since he usually lived a reclusive life in the temple, dedicating himself to meditation, he hardly ever set foot in the 'Rivers and the Lakes' region [Jianghu]. For this reason, his reputation in the world of the martial arts didn't equal Qiu Chuji's. As for the power of his kung fu, no one had ever seen him in action and could not judge how strong he was.

"We meet the Elder Master of the Quanzhen Sect," Ke Zhen'E said. "We are much honored. What brings the Taoist Master up into the steppe of the north? Does it relate to the competition in Jiaxing and our challenge with your martial brother?"

"My impetuous younger brother, when he should be dedicating himself to the practice of the Way, likes to duel with others. He often tries to win and impose his viewpoint; that is quite contrary to our principles. I've reprimanded him time and time again about this. I don't have any intentions of interfering in his bet with you, the 'Six Valiant Heroes', since it doesn't have anything to do with me. Two years ago, I met this child by chance. Finding him to have a pure and good heart, I took the liberty of teaching him some ritual formulae to fortify his body and to feed his character. This also has the virtue of encouraging longevity. It is true that I took this initiative without having asked for approval from the 'Six Valiant Heroes' beforehand; I hope they won't be angry because of it. I didn't teach him any

martial techniques and we don't have a master - disciple relationship. We could say that I merely made myself a young friend and that we never broke any rules of the martial world." After saying this, he smiled warmly.

The Six were very surprised, and could only accept his explanation. Zhu Cong and Quan Jinfa then released Guo Jing's wrists.

"So my pupil," a happy Han Xiaoying said, "it was the Senior Taoist who gave you some lessons? Why didn't you tell us about him earlier? We judged you wrongly!" She tenderly patted him on the shoulder.

"He..." Guo Jing stammered, "It was him who told me not to say anything..."

"How can you say, 'he', 'him'?" Han Xiaoying reprimanded. "Jing'er, that is very disrespectful, you need to say 'Senior Taoist'..." She scolded him, but her happy face showed her true feelings.

"Yes," Guo Jing agreed submissively. "The 'Senior Taoist'..." For two years he always treated Ma Yu on equal terms, without having ever thought to speak to him in the third person as a sign of respect. Ma Yu had never taken offense.

"I travel like a cloud," Ma Yu said, "without a schedule or final destination, and I don't like to impose on others. That is why, even though I was a neighbor, I didn't come to greet you. I ask you again to forgive me." He saluted them again.

In fact, after discovering the circumstances behind the journey of the Six Freaks to Mongolia, he felt great admiration for them. He interrogated Yin Zhiping, who confirmed that Guo Jing didn't have any neigong. As a Senior of the Quanzhen Sect he knew perfectly the principles of Taoism. He didn't want Qiu Chuji to impose this

challenge on the Six Freaks. He tried to convince his martial brother repeatedly, but Qiu would not hear of it. As last resort he came to the steppe to try to help Guo Jing without telling anyone. Otherwise, how could he have met the child, by accident, in the immensity of the northern plain? What other reason would he have for dedicating two years of his life to give Guo Jing this precious instruction? If Mei Chaofeng had not re-emerged unexpectedly, he would have discreetly left for the south once assured that Guo Jing's neigong foundations were well established. The result would have been that neither the Six Freaks nor Qiu Chuji would have suspected anything.

For displaying so much nobility and humility, which contrasted with the bravery and contrived arrogance of his martial brother, the Six bowed and saluted him. They were going to ask him about Mei Chaofeng when they heard the sound of horses galloping. They saw several riders heading towards Temujin's large ger.

Guo Jing realized that it was Senggum's emissaries who had come to entice him into a trap; he began to panic. "Senior Shifu," he said to Ke Zhen'E, "it is necessary that I leave for a short time."

Ke Zhen'E had almost seriously injured him a while ago and regretted it. He felt even more protective of this disciple and feared he'd meet Mei Chaofeng if he left. Therefore, he said, "No, you remain close to us!"

Guo Jing was going to explain to him why he had to leave, but Ke Zhen'E had begun to discuss the titanic fight against the 'Twin Killers of the Dark Winds' with Ma Yu. In spite of his anguish, the young man didn't dare interrupt his Senior Shifu, who got angry for the smallest of reasons. He hoped to be able to benefit from a pause in the conversation to explain the urgency of the situation. Suddenly, a horse

arrived at a gallop. The rider was Hua Zheng wearing a short jacket of black fox fur. She stopped ten feet away, making signals. Fearing punishment from his Shifus, Guo Jing didn't dare move away, but signaled her to approach. The girl had red swollen eyes, as if she had cried a lot.

"Dad," she said while sobbing, "wants me to go marry that Dukhsh..."

"Quickly," Guo Jing said, "go warn the Khan that Senggum and Jamuka have prepared a trap and want to kill him..."

"Is it true?" Hua Zheng asked, stunned.

"Absolutely true," answered Guo Jing, "I heard it with my own ears. Go warn your father quickly."

"Okay!" Hua Zheng agreed. With a face filled with joy, she got back on her horse and left at great speed.

"Someone wants to murder the Khan and you seem happy?" Guo Jing wondered. Then he understood; she would not have to marry Dukhsh. He cared for the girl like a sister and had always protected her. He had wondered if she was going to be able to avoid this disgraceful marriage; now he was delighted for her and he smiled.

"I don't mean to glorify the enemy nor to belittle us," Ma Yu said, "but Mei Chaofeng knows the essence of the Senior of Peach Blossom Island's teachings. Her 'Nine Yin White Bone Claw' is practically invincible, and the strokes of her 'Silver Whip of Two Zhangs' nearly unstoppable. If we unite our strength, we may not lose, but we certainly won't defeat her without suffering some harm."

"That woman is dangerously effective," Han Xiaoying said, "but we, the Six Freaks of Jiangnan, avow her an implacable hate."



"Someone told me," Ma Yu said, "that your Fifth brother, Zhang the Valiant Knight, as well as 'Divine Dragon soaring through the Sky', the valiant Ke, had both been killed by Chen Xuanfeng. But since you killed 'Copper Corpse', one could consider that the debt has been paid. As the Ancients say: 'It is better to unknot a hate than to tie it'. Mei Chaofeng is a lone woman, affected by a serious handicap, and deserves some pity..." The Six stayed silent for some time.

"She's mastered this perverse and dangerous technique," Han Baoju said, "that will cause the deaths of innumerable innocents! Senior Taoist, even though you are moved by compassion, you can't let her go with impunity..."

"This time," Zhu Cong said, "she came looking for us and not the opposite..."

"And even if we avoid it this time," Quan Jinfa said, "if she wants to take vengeance on us, we will never be safe."

"I've thought of a small stratagem," Ma Yu said, "but it is necessary that the 'Six Valiant Heroes' be magnanimous and have mercy on this poor wretch. Let her have the possibility of redemption." Zhu Cong didn't want to speak, letting Ke Zhen'E make the decision.

"We, the 'Seven Freaks of Jiangnan'," Ke said, "have a coarse and direct temperament. We only know how to fight the barbaric ones. If the Senior Taoist wants to show us a path, we would be very thankful. You only have to speak." From listening to Ma Yu, he understood that, during these past ten years, Mei Chaofeng had made considerable progress. It appeared that the Taoist was trying to save the life of 'Iron Corpse', but in reality he was trying to save the face of the Six Freaks. His real intention was to show them a way to escape the terrifying claws of Mei. The other

Freaks thought that their Senior Brother had become merciful and were astonished.

“By showing mercy, Senior Brother Ke,” Ma Yu said, “you will receive the blessings of the Heavens. There is something else that is very important. According to my inquiries, during these past ten years, Mei Chaofeng received more of the teachings of Huang Yaoshi [the Alchemist].”

“But they say,” Zhu Cong wondered, “that the Twin Killers of the Dark Winds’ were renegade disciples of the Peach Blossom Island Senior. How would Huang Yaoshi justify teaching her again?”

“This is what I also believed,” Ma Yu said. “But according to the description of the fight you had, her kung fu was much lower than what she displays today. If she didn't receive the instruction of an illuminated Senior, it would be impossible for her, training alone, to arrive at her present level. If so, and if we kill ‘Iron Corpse’ today, we risk Huang’s anger...” Ke Zhen’E and Zhu Cong had already heard of the kung fu of Huang Yaoshi, often in such exaggerated terms that they had difficulty believing in the man's power. The Quanzhen Sect represented the orthodox martial arts. If Ma Yu felt fear regarding Huang, it was evidently something to take into account.

“The Senior Taoist thinks of everything,” Zhu Cong said, “we can only be filled with admiration. Please make us part of your undoubtedly wise plan.”

“This miserable plan,” Ma Yu said, “may appear a little snobbish I’m afraid; I ask the Six Valiant Heroes not to laugh at it.”

“The Senior Taoist is too modest.” Zhu Cong said, “The reputations of the ‘Seven Disciples’ of Wang Chongyang are

so well established that the admiration is general in the martial realm!" Zhu Cong felt a genuine respect for Ma Yu. Indeed, he would not hold such respect for Qiu Chuji, who was also one of the Seven Masters of Quanzhen.

"Thanks to the virtues of our deceased founder," Ma Yu said, "the seven martial brothers benefit from a small reputation in the world of martial arts. I think that Mei Chaofeng would not dare to come against us alone. This is why I thought of a ruse to make her leave, based on the belief in our vain reputation. This stratagem lacks nobility; but since our intention is good, the end justifies the means, and it won't harm the reputations of the Six Valiant Heroes." He then explained the deception. The Six Freaks found it rather depreciating. They thought to themselves that even though Mei Chaofeng had made great progress, and even if Huang Yaoshi came in person, what would they risk? At most they would lose their lives, as Zhang Ahsheng had ten years before. Ma Yu undertook to convince them. Finally the Six Freaks, out of respect for him and recognition for everything that he had done for Guo Jing, accepted.

After having sharing some refreshments, they moved towards the cliff. Ma Yu and Guo Jing undertook the climb ahead of them. The Six noticed that the Taoist didn't try to show off his skills as he slowly climbed behind Guo Jing. But his steps were firm and his movements displayed great stability, showing the power of his kung fu. "He is certainly not weaker than Qiu Chuji, so why is Qiu's reputation so great, whereas one hears practically nothing about Ma Yu? The explanation must be their difference in character..." Arriving at the top, Ma Yu and Guo Jing dropped long ropes, and then pulled the Six to the summit. There on the rocks they could examine the traces left by Mei Chaofeng's whip. They were stunned, and finally believed Ma Yu's words.

The eight sat down and waited. Night had fallen and it was already late. Han Baoju began to lose patience, "How come she's so late?"

"Quiet!" Ke Zhen'E urged, "There she is!"

They all listened carefully, without hearing anything. Only Ke Zhen'E, with his incredibly developed hearing, had discerned the footsteps of 'Iron Corpse' while she was still several li away. But she was coming. They saw, in the moonlight, a blurred black shadow that approached at a very quick pace. In the blink of an eye she'd reached the foot of the cliff and she began to climb with agility. Zhu Cong exchanged a glance with Quan Jinfa and Han Xiaoying; he saw that their faces were pale and full of anguish. He thought that his must look the same.

Very quickly, Mei Chaofeng reached the summit. She carried on her back someone who wasn't moving and they couldn't tell if the person was alive or already dead. Guo Jing had the impression that this person wore clothing that was familiar to him. He watched more attentively and recognized Hua Zheng's short black fox jacket. Alarmed, he was going to call out when Zhu Cong, with the quick eyes and fast moves, put his hand over his mouth, while saying in a high voice, "That vicious witch, Mei Chaofeng, if she falls into my hands, I, Qiu Chuji, won't let her escape!"

Surprised at hearing a voice on the summit, 'Iron Corpse' was even more astonished to hear the name of Qiu Chuji and her own. She hid behind a rock to listen to the conversation. Ma Yu and the Six Freaks clearly saw her intentions and, in spite of the tension, wanted to laugh. Only Guo Jing, worried about the safety of Hua Zheng, trembled with anguish.

“Mei Chaofeng arranged these skulls here,” Han Baoju said, “she is certainly going to come, and we only have to wait for her.” Not knowing how many powerful enemies were gathered in this place, she remained immobile behind the rock.

“She certainly caused us a lot of pain, but the Quanzhen Sect is always compassionate and merciful towards others. Let's give her the option of repenting.”

“The ‘Sage of Tranquility’ has always had a tender heart,” Zhu Cong said while laughing. “It’s not surprising that Master always said that you can reach the Way easily!”

Wang Chongyang, the founder of the Quanzhen Sect, had seven disciples, whose reputations are well established in the world of martial arts. The first in rank was Ma Yu, called ‘Scarlet Sun’, the second Tan Chuduan, called ‘Eternal Truth’, followed by Liu Chuxuan, called ‘Eternal Life’, Qiu Chuji, called ‘Eternal Spring’, Wang Chuyi, called ‘Jade Sun’, Hao Datong, called ‘Infinite Peace’, and finally the last disciple, Sun Bu’Er, was called ‘Sage of Tranquility’, and had been the wife of Ma Yu before she entered the Taoist religion.

“Brother Tan,” Han Xiaoying asked, “what do you think about it?”

“Her crimes deserve an extreme punishment!” replied Nan Xiren.

“Brother Tan,” Zhu Cong said, “of late you’ve made much progress in your technique the ‘Finger Calligrapher’. When this evil one arrives, will you give us a demonstration?”

“It’s better to let Brother Wang show us his technique the ‘Foot of Iron’,” Nan Xiren said. “One kick and he will send her down the cliff where she will lose both body and soul.”

Among the Seven Masters of the Quanzhen Sect, Qiu Chuji was the most well known, then came Wang Chuyi, 'Jade Sun'. Once, on a bet, he stood close to an abyss on one foot, swaying back and forth in a violent wind that blew his large sleeves wildly. Several heroes of Shandong and Hebei watched this event and were astounded. This exploit earned him the nickname of 'Foot of Iron'. He had lived as a recluse in an underground cave for nine years, dedicating himself to the practice of martial arts. Even Qiu Chuji appeared to much admire his kung fu. He had dedicated a poem to him, in which he told of the 'Nine summers standing in the sun, three winters laying down in the snow' celebrating the power of his neigong.

All of this conversation between them had been studied in advance. Only Ke Zhen'E, who had previously spoken to the 'Twin Killers of the Dark Winds', remained silent, so that Mei Chaofeng wouldn't recognize him by his voice.

'Iron Corpse' was more and more astonished. "Apparently, the Seven Masters of the Quanzhen Sect are here! I am not really certain of being able to beat a single Taoist, how would I withstand the seven united! If they discover me, I am dead!"

At that moment, the moon illuminated the summit clearly. Zhu Cong said, "This night, black clouds cover the sky, one can't even see the fingers of his hand! Everybody be watchful so that the witch doesn't take advantage of the darkness to escape!"

"It's a good thing that it is a black night," Mei Chaofeng reassured herself, "otherwise they would have discovered me already. I give thanks to the Heaven and Earth, so long as the moon doesn't appear!"

Guo Jing had not stopped looking at Hua Zheng. He suddenly saw that she had opened her eyes. Delighted to see her regain consciousness, he made signals with his hands hoping that she would remain calm. However, the girl had also seen him, and yelled, "Help...Help!"

"Don't say anything!" Guo Jing shouted.

These shouts surprised Mei Chaofeng. She immediately pushed a finger onto one particular point on Hua Zheng's body which made the girl mute. But suspicions were roused in her mind.

"Zhiping," Zhu Cong said, "was that you that spoke?"

Indeed, Guo Jing was supposed to play the role of the young Taoist Yin Zhiping. "Yes... Yes, it was me..."

"I believe," Zhu Cong said, "that I heard a woman's voice."

"Precisely," confirmed Guo Jing.

"If this is a trap," Mei Chaofeng thought, "is it likely that the Seven Masters of the Quanzhen Sect would be together on the steppe and on the summit of this cliff? What a coincidence that would be! Maybe someone is trying to deceive me and take advantage of my blindness."

Ma Yu saw her slowly standing up behind her rock and understood that she had become suspicious. If she discovered the scheme and immediately went to the attack, he himself probably wouldn't risk much; but Hua Zheng would certainly die and the Six Freaks would, without a doubt, suffer some injuries. He was therefore quite upset. He'd never had a quick mind and he didn't know what to do.

Seeing Mei Chaofeng with her long silver whip in hand, seeming about to attack, Zhu Cong hastened to say, "Senior Brother, for all these years you've practiced the most

sophisticated techniques taught by our founder, you must have gotten extraordinary results. Would you demonstrate it for us?"

Ma Yu knew that Zhu Cong was asking him to show the power of his kung fu, in order to impress Mei Chaofeng. "I am certainly the eldest of our brothers," he then said, "but my slow nature makes me less capable than you. The formulas transmitted by our founder, I am ashamed to say, I hardly understood a sentence of it..." He pronounced each of his words very slowly, while feeding them his breath fully. The tone was quiet and humble, but the voice carried very far. He had not finished pronouncing his last words when the echo of the first came back with winds, like the growls of tiger and the screams of dragons. Witnessing this demonstration of extraordinarily powerful neigong, Mei Chaofeng, impressed, lowered herself slowly behind her rock.

"I have heard" Ma Yu said, "that this woman has lost her mind and that she is worthy of pity. If she repents her past sins, if she promises to no longer harm the innocent, we might be merciful. Should she also promise that she will not trouble the Six Freaks of Jiangnan, then we could let her continue to live because of our departed master's respectful relations with the Master of Peach Blossom Island. Brother Qiu, you are the friend of the Six; you should speak to them, and ask them to no longer seek a reckoning with her. If both parties make an effort, the vendetta can extinguish itself." This time, he spoke without using his internal energy, so that there did not appear to be such a great power difference between himself and the others.

"That will be easy," Zhu Cong replied. "But the real problem is knowing whether or not Mei Chaofeng will agree to redeem herself."



Suddenly, they heard an icy voice. "Many thanks to the Quanzhen Seven for their benevolence! I, Mei Chaofeng, am here!" Suddenly and surprisingly, she came forth. Ma Yu had hoped to frighten her and make her leave, regretting her deeds and would mend her ways. But, confident of her new power, she had the audacity to come and confront her opponents directly.

"Being a woman," Mei Chaofeng said, "I would not dare to test myself against the Taoist masters. But for a long time I have admired the kung fu of the 'Sage of Tranquility'; I ask for the honor of measuring myself against her." Armed with her whip, she stood at the ready, waiting for Han Xiaoying's response.

All the while, Guo Jing was acutely aware that Hua Zheng had fallen motionless to the ground. He'd grown up with her and felt the affection of an elder brother for the girl. Without a moment's thought, without even worrying about the terrifying presence of Mei Chaofeng, he leaped out and freed Hua Zheng. With a quick move, 'Iron Corpse' seized his left wrist. Guo Jing had practiced orthodox Taoist internal energy with Ma Yu for two years and his healthy body was strengthened by this natural force. With his right hand, he propelled Hua Zheng towards Han Xiaoying, while he pivoted his left hand with force and released himself from Mei's control. She possessed extremely swift skills so when she felt Guo Jing escape she moved her hand immediately to recapture him. This time, she held him firmly, compressing the point of the principal artery in his arm so precisely that he could no longer move.

"Who are you?" she demanded in a terrible voice.

"Zhiping," Zhu Cong called, "listen!"

Guo Jing, who had panicked because he could not free himself, was going to reply instinctively "I am Guo Jing!" when he heard Zhu Cong's warning.

"I am..." he stammered, "I am Yin Zhiping... Disciple... disciple of the Quanzhen... Spring." Although he had repeated those words thirty or forty times, in his panic he was not able to say it without stammering.

"He is only a simple apprentice," Mei Chaofeng said to herself, "yet his neigong already is capable. Not only did he succeed in saving someone from under my nose, he was even able to release himself from my first hold! I think it is better that I retreat this time." She dropped his hand. Guo Jing recovered and hastily returned to his masters. Five finger marks were deeply indented into the flesh of his left arm! He knew full well that she had not used all of her power; otherwise his wrist would have been broken.

Mei Chaofeng no longer dared to challenge the false Sun Bu'Er, played by Han Xiaoying. She suddenly asked, "Taoist Master Ma, what is the meaning of 'Lead and mercury preserve well'?"

"Lead is heavy," Ma Yu responded automatically, "it resembles the kidneys; mercury is liquid, it is a metaphor for internal warming. 'Lead and mercury preserve well' means that it is good to stabilize the kidneys and to extinguish the internal fire, in order to obtain results from meditation."

"And what is the meaning of 'Baby of the girl Cha'?" Mei Chaofeng pursued.

Ma Yu suddenly became aware that she was asking him to explain secret formulae of neigong! "Heretical witch," he shouted, "Do not try to extract the secrets of my sect from me! Leave quickly!"

Mei Chaofeng laughed, "Thank you for your answer, Taoist Master!"

She suddenly jumped forward, armed with her silvery whip, and glided to the bottom of the cliff at unbelievable speed. Those remaining looked on, relieved to have escaped a conflict. Far away on the steppe, a shadow sped away like a phantom.

Ma Yu unsealed Hua Zheng's accupoints which returned her ability to move. The girl lay on a boulder resting.

"In ten years," Zhu Cong said, "that woman made so much progress, that if the Taoist Master had not lent us a strong hand today, our accounts would have been settled!" Ma Yu responded modestly, but he was frowning, as if an inner worry tormented him.

"If there is some task to finish," Zhu Cong said, "even though we are not capable of great things, we can at least do your bidding. Do not hesitate to ask it of us."

"Because of my inattention," Ma Yu said, "I was tricked by that crafty woman!"

"Were you injured by a secret weapon?" the Six asked.

"No," replied Ma Yu, "it is nothing like that. When she asked me a question, I replied without thinking, and I fear that it might result in further evil." His friends were perplexed and seemed not to understand. The Taoist explained, "The external technique of 'Iron Corpse' has already reached a level that we cannot even imagine. Even if my brothers Qiu and Wang really had been present here, we might not have been able to overcome her. That the Master of Peach Blossom Island succeeded in producing a disciple of such strength...proves his own power. Only the neigong of Mei Chaofeng is not at all advanced. I do not know where she

succeeded in finding the secret formulae to practice Taoist neigong, but without pointers from a master, she was not able to understand them. When she asked me to explain a formula, it was because the lack of understanding had arrested her progress. I realized something was wrong and did not reply to her second question; but my first explanation will allow her to make great progress with her neigong."

"Let us hope," Han Xiaoying said, "that she will regret her past crimes and do no more evil."

"May it be so!" Ma Yu said. "If her neigong should become stronger, she will be more difficult to contain... Ah, this is my fault, I was too naïve and should have distrusted her..." After a moment's thought, he continued, "One thing intrigues me. The skills of the Peach Blossom Island are completely different to those of Taoism. Nevertheless, these two formulas that she quoted correspond precisely with our Taoist neigong. How is that possible?"

Hua Zheng suddenly leapt off her boulder, "Ah!" she cried, "Guo Jing! Father did not believe me, he left to visit Ong Khan!"

"Why?" Guo Jing asked.

"I explained to him," Hua Zheng said, "that Uncle Senggum and Uncle Jamuka plotted against him. He burst out laughing, saying that because I don't want to marry Dukhsh, I invented lies! I said to him that you had heard it with your own ears; but he didn't want to believe it. He even said that he would punish you on his return. I saw him leave with my three elder brothers and a small escort. I hurried to come to find you, but on the way, that blind woman caught me. She wanted to bring me to see you, isn't that right?"

"If we had not been here," one the Six said ominously, "you would have had five holes in your skull by now!"

"When did the Khan leave?" Guo Jing demanded anxiously.

"A long time ago," Hua Zheng responded, "father said that he wanted to get there as soon as possible. He didn't even wait for sunrise. Their horses are very fast; they must be far away by now. Is it really true that Uncle Senggum wants to harm Father? What will we do?" She began to weep. This was the first time in his life that he found himself confronted with a matter so grave and he was distraught.

"Jing'er," Zhu Cong said, "Descend the cliff quickly and take your little red horse and rescue the Khan. Even if it is not true, we'll send someone to ascertain Senggum's intentions. Hua Zheng, will you ask your brother Tolui to muster soldiers and follow to rescue your father." Guo Jing understood and quickly descended the cliff. Ma Yu, holding on to a long rope, went next descending with Hua Zheng.

The young man dashed to his ger, mounted his horse and set off at a frantic gallop. At that moment, the sun started to rise. Guo Jing, very worried, muttered to himself, "I fear that the Khan might already have fallen into Senggum's trap; then it will be impossible to rescue him!"

The small red horse loved to run without its bridle and its heart danced with joy. It galloped more and more quickly on the plain. Fearing that it would fall, Guo Jing tried to rein it in a little; but the animal resisted and rushed on whinnying with joy. Besides, even galloping at great speed, it showed no signs of fatigue. After more than two hours of galloping, Guo Jing slowed his mount to rest a little. Then they continued on their way. One hour later, they saw in the distance three groups of riders, three squadrons, it seemed. While approaching, he recognized the standards of Ong

Khan. The riders advanced, arrows strung and sabers drawn, ready for battle.

"The Khan is further ahead," Guo Jing lamented, "but his line of retreat is already blocked!" He pressed his thighs and his horse raced on like an arrow, passing Ong Khan's soldiers. They called for him to stop, but he was already long gone.

Guo Jing did not dare dally. He saw another three squadrons lying in wait, before he saw, far away, the high plume of white feathers that signaled the presence of Temujin. Escorted by several hundred riders, they rode tranquilly north. Guo Jing rose to his full height and called, "Great Khan! Stop, you mustn't go on!"

Temujin, taken aback, halted, "Why not?"

Guo Jing recounted to him what he had heard in Senggum's ger, and explained that his line of retreat had been cut. Temujin glanced at him skeptically, not knowing whether he should believe him, "I never got along well with that fool Senggum," he said to himself, "but my adopted father Ong Khan needs me now. Jamuka is my sworn brother; how could they plot against me... unless the Sixth Jin Prince is trying to sow dissension!"

He hesitated, and Guo Jing said, "Great Khan, you have only to send someone back the way you have just traveled and you will see..."

Since childhood, Temujin had lived in the middle of plots and treacheries; he had survived hundreds of battles thanks to his bravery and his caution. Even though he had said that it was absolutely impossible that Ong Khan and Jamuka could have allied themselves against him, he said: "To be careful ten thousand times is not excessive; but to die through carelessness one time is." He then ordered his

second son, Chagatai, to leave with Tchila'un. The two men went back the way they had come.

Temujin observed the lay of the land and ordered, "Let us go up that hill and make ready!" His escort was only made up of some hundreds of men, but they were all elite soldiers and officers. Without needing other orders, they dug trenches, raised barricades, and got ready to withstand a siege. Shortly after, they saw dust clouds rising in the south, raised by several thousand riders galloping in pursuit of Chagatai and Tchila'un. Jebe had particularly good eyesight and recognized the banners of the pursuers.

"They are Ong Khan's soldiers," he shouted. They had divided themselves into several detachments and tried to surround Chagatai and Tchila'un. The two men leaned forward on their saddles and desperately whipped their mounts.

"Guo Jing," Jebe cried, "to their aid!"

Both of them descended the hill. The small red horse, glad to meet its herd mates, arrived quickly in front of Tchila'un. Guo Jing loosed three arrows with a rush of wind, cutting down the three closest pursuing soldiers, before interposing himself between the pursuers and the pursued while continuing to fire his arrows in all directions. Jebe had arrived also and his arrows flew as well, swift and deadly. Nevertheless, Ong Khan's men, too numerous to overcome, rushed forward like an irresistible tide. Chagatai, Tchila'un, Jebe and Guo Jing at last reached the hill. Their companions rained arrows on their pursuers who did not dare to launch a frontal attack, and for the moment, waited out of range.

Standing on the hill, Temujin observed the surroundings. Soon, Ong Khan's regiments came rushing in from all directions. Under a yellow flag, a man rode on a great

horse; it was Senggum, son of Ong Khan. The Khan well knew that it was impossible to break the encirclement and that it was better to stall for time. "Why is Brother Senggum afraid to approach and parley?" he called.

Under the protection of his guards, who covered him with their shields, Senggum approached, confident and arrogant, "Temujin, make your retreat!"

"How," Temujin demanded, "did I offend my adopted father Ong Khan, so that you attack me?"

"For generations and generations," Senggum said, "the Mongolians lived in separate tribes, at the heart of which the flocks were spread and divided in common. Why do you want to run counter to the traditions of our ancestors, by mixing the tribes? My father has often said that you are wrong to want to do that."

"We Mongols," Temujin replied, "are subordinate to the Jin Empire that demands of us each year, a tribute of tens of thousands of cattle. Is this just? If that continues, all of us will starve to death! If we did not fight amongst ourselves, why should we be afraid of the Jin Empire? I have always maintained good relations with my adoptive father; there is no hatred between our two families. It is the fault of the Jin, who wants to sow disunity between us!" Senggum's soldiers, hearing this debate, thought that his words had merit.

"We Mongolians are valiant warriors," Temujin continued, "why should we not go and take the treasures of the Jin? Why should we furnish tributes to them every year? Amongst the Mongolians, there are some that work hard to husband the herds, and then there are lazy ones. Why should those that work tire themselves nourishing those that do nothing? Why should those that sweat not have



more cattle and sheep? Why do they not leave the lazy ones to die of hunger?"

At that time, the Mongolians lived according to a type of tribal socialism. Their principal wealth, cattle and sheep, belonged to all. During the last few years, the flocks had increased in size. The tribes had learned from the Chinese to work iron for the manufacture of tools and weapons. Most of the animal herders wished to keep the wealth that they produced for themselves; just as the warriors that, at the risk of their lives, won battles and did not want to divide prisoners and loot with those that did not go to war. These matters went straight to the hearts of all the soldiers.

Seeing that Temujin was beginning to influence his men, Senggum cried, "Lay down your weapons at once and surrender! Otherwise, it will take but a signal from my whip to rain down ten thousand arrows! You have no chance of escape!"

Guo Jing saw that the situation had become critical, but did not know what to do. Then he saw, at the foot of the hill, a young officer, his armor covered by a coat of grey fur, with a saber in his hand, proudly parading back and forth on his war horse. It was Dukhsh, the son of Senggum, with whom he had fought in his childhood. He was the villainous rascal that had wanted to unleash leopards on Tolui. Guo Jing did not really understand why this was happening, and especially why Ong Khan, Senggum and Jamuka wanted to plot against Temujin. "The Khan and Ong Khan have always lived in harmony," he said to himself, "it must mean that Dukhsh, at the instigation of the Sixth Jin Prince, has spread misleading and malicious lies. If I capture him and force him to admit his lies, then everyone will be able to reconcile!" Spurring his small red horse, he descended the hill and, taking advantage of the surprise, forced his way to Dukhsh.

Attacking with his blade, Guo Jing leaned out of his saddle, the blade held above his head, and with his right hand he trapped the principal artery on Dukhsh's wrist. It was a movement of the famed technique 'Disconnect the Muscles and Separate the Bones' perfected by Zhu Cong and Dukhsh could not withstand it. With a pull, Guo Jing snatched him out of his saddle. He heard the hissing of heavy projectiles from his left, about to fall upon him. He pressed lightly with his knees; the small red horse obeyed immediately and flew like an arrow towards the hill.

Senggum's soldiers called, "Fire arrows!" Guo Jing placed Dukhsh behind him, using his body as a shield, so well that the enemy did not dare to fire.

Arriving at the summit of the hill, Guo Jing threw Dukhsh to the ground laughing, "Great Khan, this rascal is surely the person responsible for this treachery! Let us make him acknowledge it!"

Temujin, very happy, pointed his lance at Dukhsh's chest and shouted in the direction of Senggum, "Move your men back two hundred zhangs!" [1 zhang = 3.3 meters / 11+ ft]

Senggum, upset and worried to see his well armed son fall into the hands of the enemy, could do nothing but back up his army. He ordered them to encircle the hill with ordered ranks of wagons, so that Temujin's horsemen would be unable to sally out.

On the hill, Temujin praised Guo Jing warmly, and ordered him to tie the prisoner's hands behind his back.

Three times Senggum sent a messenger to negotiate. If Temujin released Dukhsh and left, his life would be spared. Each time, the Khan cut the ears off the messenger before he returned them to their master.

The sun moved towards the horizon. Fearing that Senggum would use the dusk to attack, Temujin ordered that everyone should double their vigilance.

Towards midnight, a man clothed in white approached the foot of the hill. "I am Jamuka," he called out. "I wish to see my sworn brother Temujin."

"You may come up!" the Khan said.

Jamuka ascended slowly and saw Temujin standing at the top of the slope. He advanced and made as if to embrace him, but the Khan, not letting his guard down, said roughly, "You still consider me a brother?"

Jamuka sighed and seated himself cross-legged. "Brother," he said, "You are already the chief of a tribe, why do you have this ambition to unify all of the Mongols?"

"What do you believe?" Temujin replied.

"The chieftains of the tribes say: 'our ancestors lived this way for hundreds of years, why does Temujin want to change tradition? Heaven will not allow it!'"

"Do you remember the history of our ancestor Lady Alan Qo'a?" Temujin said. "She had five sons that lived in discord. She asked all of them to come and eat with her. Then she gave an arrow to each and asked them to break it. This they did very easily. Next, she tied five arrows together, and asked again that they break them. Each tried in turn, but none were able to break the five arrows. Do you recall what she said to them then?"

"If you are not united," Jamuka said in a low voice, "you can be broken by those of no importance, just like a single arrow. If you unite, you will be as solid as the five arrows and no person will break you."

“So,” Temujin said, “you remember that. What happened next?”

“The five sons united their efforts and conquered an immense territory. They are the ancestors of our Mongol tribes.”

“Exactly! Both of us are brave and heroic; why not unite all of the Mongolians? If we do not quarrel amongst ourselves, we will be strong enough to destroy the Jin Empire!”

“But how?” Jamuka asked, “The Jin Empire is powerful and its armies and wealth are immeasurable; how can we Mongolians defeat them?”

“Then you prefer to remain submissive to the Jin?”

“The Jin Empire does not oppress us,” Jamuka protested. “The emperor has even made you a ‘Northern Ambassador’!”

“At first,” Temujin said honestly, “I also believed that they had good intentions. But the greed of the Jin has no limits, and they demand more from us each time. First they want cattle, next horses, and now they ask that we send soldiers to help them make war. The country of the Song is far removed from our lands! Even if the Song dynasty falls, all the lands conquered will belong to Jin alone. We will lose warriors, to win what? Since when would our cattle stop eating the green grass of our plains to go eat the sand on the other side of the mountains? If we must battle, it should be against the Jin Empire only!”

“Ong Khan and Senggum do not want to betray the Jin.” Jamuka said.

“To betray?” Temujin mocked. “Betray? And you?”

"I beseech you, brother, do not let your anger get the better of you; release Dukhsh, and Senggum and I will guarantee to let you leave safely."

"I have no confidence in Senggum; now I have no confidence in you!"

"Hear the words of Senggum," Jamuka said. "If a son dies, other sons will be born. If Temujin dies, there will never be another Temujin! If you do not release Dukhsh, you will not see another sunrise!"

Temujin knew well the characters of Senggum and Jamuka. If left in their hands, he knew that he would have no chance of survival. If Ong Khan was there, he might possibly live. He brandished his saber and whirled around.

"I would rather die in battle," he cried, "than to surrender! Under heaven, there is a Temujin who will die on the field of honour and no Temujin that flees!"

Jamuka said, "You give all of the loot to the warriors, saying that it belongs to them and not to the whole tribe. The chieftains of the tribes say that you do wrong; that you run counter to our traditions."

"But the young warriors are delighted!" Temujin said harshly. "The chieftains pretend that the treasures of war cannot be distributed equitably to each warrior, so they keep it all for themselves. Such practices insult the warriors who risked their lives to support them. When we are at war, do we need stupid and greedy chieftains, or do we need young courageous warriors?"

"Brother," Jamuka said, "You've always acted on your own and never listened to the leaders of the other tribes. Don't call me ungrateful or traitor. These past days, you've been sending people to convince my soldiers to join your army by

telling them that, once back home, the resources gained in battle belong to the ones that fought for them. They won't be distributed amongst all the tribe's members. Did you think that I didn't know of it?"

"If you are aware of it," Temujin thought, "then we won't ever live in peace with each other." He then took a small bag out of his clothing and threw it at the feet of Jamuka. "Here are the gifts that you offered me when we swore, three times, loyalty to each other. Take them. Later, when you cut off my head with your saber, you will only kill an enemy and not a sworn brother. I am a hero, you are also a hero. The plains of Mongolia are vast, but it cannot contain two heroes."

Jamuka picked up the bag. He then took a small leather bag from his own clothing, dropped it at Temujin's feet in silence, and moved down the hill.

Temujin looked at him as he moved away; then he stood a long time in silence. He slowly opened the bag, withdrew the stones and the arrowheads from it, and remembered the games that they'd played when they were children. He sighed, dug a hole with a dagger and buried the gifts he'd given to his former sworn brother in it.

Guo Jing was next to him, also feeling heart-broken. What Temujin buried, he well knew, was an infinitely precious childhood friendship.

The Khan stood up and studied the scene. As far as he could see there were fires lit by the armies of Senggum and Jamuka illuminating the plain, looking like the myriads of stars in the sky. He remained divided in his thoughts. He turned around and saw Guo Jing close to him. "Are you afraid?" he asked.

"I was thinking about my mother," answered the young man.

"Indeed, you are a brave son," said Temujin, "a true brave son!" He pointed to the thousands of fires on the plain, "They also," he continued, "are brave! We Mongols have so many brave sons, but we spend time making wars on ourselves. If we could unite them, we could take over the world and make it a huge field for our herds!"

Guo Jing, hearing these very ambitious words, felt even more admiration for Temujin. He stuck out his chest and said, "Great Khan, we are surely going to win, because we cannot be beaten by a coward like Senggum!"

"Precisely," Temujin answered with a smile. "Let's remember what we say tonight. If we manage to survive, henceforth I will consider you as my own son." He then hugged the young man.

As they spoke, the new day had begun. Horns sounded repeatedly in the ranks of the enemy.

"Help won't come," Temujin said. "Let's prepare ourselves to die on this hill." They heard, in the adversary's army, the jangle of the weapons and the neighs of horses; the attack was imminent.

"Great Khan," Guo Jing suddenly said, "my red horse is extremely fast. Take it and bring back help. In the mean time, we will remain here to face the enemy."

Temujin smiled and stretched his hand to caress the hair of the young man.

"If Temujin," he said, "was capable of abandoning his friends and his men to run away in fear for his life, he wouldn't be worthy of being your Khan!"

"That's true, Great Khan," Guo Jing acknowledged, "I was wrong..."

They hid themselves behind protective mounds of earth, ready to fire arrows at the attackers.

Shortly thereafter, three men left the enemy's ranks preceded by a yellow standard and moved forward. On the left was Senggum, on the right, Jamuka, and in the center, surprisingly, was the Sixth Prince of the Jin Empire, Wanyan Honglie! He was covered with armor, a golden helmet and had a shield of gold on his arm. He shouted, "Temujin, do you dare betray the Jin Empire?"

Jochi, Temujin's eldest son, shot an arrow at him, but a man in his escort seized it from the air with astounding speed.

"Capture Temujin!" Wanyan Honglie shouted. At these words, four men hurried up the hill. Their movements were a surprise to Guo Jing. He noted that the newcomers, who used a lightness technique, were experts in martial arts and weren't warriors of the plains. Arriving at mid-hill, they avoided with agility the rain of arrows that Jebe, Borchu and the others shot. "We have officers and brave men of great strength here," Guo Jing worried, "but they won't be a match for experts in martial arts! What can we do?"

One among them, clothed in black, bounded to the summit of the hill.

Ogedai tried to stop him, but the newcomer hit his neck with a dart and swung down with his saber at the injured man. However, as quick as lightning, a sword came down to hit his wrist with a great speed and precision. The movement so well executed that he was forced to move back three steps. Surprised, he saw a young man with a strong build standing in front of Ogedai. Not expecting to



find an expert swordsman amongst Temujin's soldiers, he exclaimed, in Chinese, "Who are you? What is your name?"

"I am called Guo Jing!"

"I've never heard anyone speak of you! Surrender now!"

Guo Jing took a look around and saw that the three other attackers were on the summit of the hill and already engaged in an unarmed fight with Tchila'un, Borchu and the others. He struck again at the man with the saber who defended, then retaliated.

Just as Senggum's soldiers got ready to assault the hill, Muqali put his saber on the nape of Dukhsh's neck. "If you come," he shouted, "my blade will be without mercy!"

Senggum, very worried, turned toward Wanyan Honglie and said, "Lord Zhao, tell your men to come back, we will find another way! There's no reason to sacrifice my child!"

"Don't worry," Wanyan Honglie smiled and said, "Nothing will happen to him!" But in reality he wanted to force Temujin to kill Dukhsh and create a lasting hate between the two tribes.

Senggum's men didn't dare move, while those of the Prince were in a violent fight.

Guo Jing used the techniques of the 'Sword of the Yue Maiden' that Han Xiaoying had taught him. After several exchanges, he was faced with danger. His opponent's saber was powerful, his strength abundant and all his techniques were backed with internal energy so he was not a weak adversary. Guo Jing's long sword made swift movements and seemed to have turned into flashes of light. His sword tip was aimed at the critical places on his adversary and every technique was intended to harm his opponent. Guo

Jing's opponent felt a bit overwhelmed by his fast attacks and became flustered.

His three companions, who had already defeated several Mongol officers, saw him in difficulty. One among them, armed with a big spear, approached with a jump, "Big Brother, I've come to give you a helping hand!"

But the man with the saber shouted, "Don't move and admire the dexterity of your Older Brother!"

Taking advantage of his distraction, Guo Jing, delivered a stroke 'The Phoenix Flies off and the Snake Bounds', as he pointed the tip of his sword at the lower part of his opponent's body. The man moved back, but the blade had already split his left sleeve.

The man with the saber moved back and shouted, "Who is your master? Why do you look for death here?"

Guo Jing remained in a defensive posture and answered in the language of the Rivers and Lakes region [Jianghu] taught by his masters, "I am the disciple of the 'Seven Freaks of Jiangnan'. What are your honorable names and surnames?" He had practiced these polite forms of address for a long time, but this was the first time that he'd actually used them.

"Our names," the man with the saber said, while casting a glance towards his brothers-in-arms, "even if I told you, you would not know them. Defend yourself!"

After the first clashes, Guo Jing truly felt that his adversary was stronger than him. But the techniques taught by his Seventh Shifu were extremely sophisticated and provoked a lot of apprehension in his enemy; so much so that he could take the initiative and attack without moving back. The man with the saber used the stance 'Survey the Sea and Behead

the Dragon as his saber slashed towards Guo Jing's legs. In a matter of moments they had exchanged twenty or thirty stances. Both sides intently observed the fight. The man with the saber began to get nervous and his strokes became more and more violent. Suddenly, he attacked Guo Jing's waist. Guo Jing twisted and replied with a stroke called 'Turn Around to Pick the Fruit' towards the arm that held the saber. His adversary, seeing that he didn't bother about defending, believed that his hour had come: "When your sword touches its goal," he thought, "my saber will have already cut you in two!"

However, Guo Jing, sure of his strong neigong, moved his waist to the side without moving the rest of his body, and avoided the saber and planted his sword in the man's chest.

The man screamed, released his saber and struck the blade of the sword with his hand causing it fall to the ground. But the tip of Guo Jing's sword had already penetrated a half inch into his chest! He had saved his life, but his palm was cut and bled profusely.

He then heard the hiss of a weapon behind him and heard Jebe shout, "Watch out, behind you!"

Without even looking back, Guo Jing executed a backwards kick and blocked the stroke that came at him. At the same time, he grabbed the fallen saber and executed a saber cut at the hand of the enemy. Guo Jing delivered the stroke 'Advancing a Pace to Seize the Basket', deflecting the lance with his left hand. He turned his left palm and seized his opponents spear while his right hand holding the saber hacked towards the spear wielder. The man used all his strength to pull back his spear, but when he saw the saber about to hit him, he released his grip and retreated.

With this victory, the young man felt renewed again. With a flourish, he threw the saber to the foot of the hill, and picked up the lance. The fourth man jumped at him shouting and attacking with his two short axes. Guo Jing's spear techniques were taught by Quan Jinfa. After several exchanges Guo Jing feigned a flaw that the man with the axes was thrilled to see and he hacked at him. Suddenly, he felt pain in his stomach; he had been kicked by Guo Jing. He flew backwards while the force remaining in his left hand moved his axe towards his own head. The third martial brother of the axe man blocked it with his iron whip. When the two weapons met there was a 'clang' and sparks flew. The man released his axe when the weapons collided and sat down on the ground with a frightened look on his face, dumbfounded but alive. The man was a fool and it took him a minute before he realized that he had lost. He shouted angrily and picked up his axes to attack again. After a few axe slashes he hacked Guo Jing's spear into two pieces. Guo Jing had lost his weapon, so he used his palms to counter him. The man with the iron whip came to his martial brother assistance and Guo Jing saw that he was at a disadvantage but had no choice but to keep fighting.

This provoked indignation amongst the soldiers. Mongols are simple and direct and respect men of courage. They were scandalized to see these four men taking turns fighting Guo Jing, and now, they were pitting themselves two against one unarmed man! They regarded that as dishonorable, and shouted for them to stop. Guo Jing was a worthy opponent and they cheered him.

Borchu and Jebe drew their sabers and joined the battle; they did so well that the other two assailants also joined in the battle. The two Mongolians were invincible on the battlefield, but they were out of their depth in single combat against experts in martial arts. They fought only a

couple of exchanges with great difficulty before they were disarmed and had to retreat. Guo Jing saw that Borchu was in danger and stormed towards him to attack the man that used the saber. Guo Jing struck a palm towards the back of the eldest martial brother who used his saber to hack at Guo Jing's wrist. Guo Jing retracted his palm and used his elbow to attack the second martial brother to save Jebe. His attempts to provide some assistance to them proved futile.

The four assailants had only one obsession, to kill Guo Jing. They doubled their efforts to attack Guo Jing. The soldiers on the summit and at the foot of the hill redoubled their shouts and insults; but the four turned a deaf ear on them. The spearman had collected a javelin from the ground. Coming at him Guo Jing saw, at the same time, a saber, javelin, whip and axes! Since he was unarmed, he could not parry or reply, so his only option was to avoid the blows employing his lightness art [Qinggong]. He moved back and forth and avoided numerous attacks in him.

For another twenty odd stances the men continued their attacks on Guo Jing. His arm, cut by the saber, was bleeding and he was in a dire position.

Suddenly a disturbance disrupted the ranks of Senggum's army as six individuals nimbly brushed through the soldiers and ascended the hill. The Mongolians thought that they were more lackeys of Wanyan Honglie coming to lend assistance to their comrades, and noisily voiced their disapproval.

Temujin's men prepared to shoot arrows at them to prevent their approach when Jebe, whose vision was particularly acute, saw that it was the 'Jiangnan Freaks'. "Jing'er," he cried, "Here come your teachers!"

Guo Jing, nearly unable to resist any longer, was cheered up.

Arriving first, Zhu Cong and Quan Jinfa realized right away the perilous position their disciple was in. Quan jumped forward and struck the four weapons with a blow of his balance scale, "Have you no shame!" he cried.

Feeling great pain in their hands, the four men realized that a more powerful opponent had just arrived and drew back. Zhu Cong had rescued Guo Jing. Meanwhile, the other Freaks arrived.

"Shameless scoundrels," Quan Jinfa scolded. "Be off! Have you no face?"

The man with the saber was well aware that they had lost their advantage, and if they continued the fight, they would be defeated. But if they backed down, they would lose face and could no longer dare to serve the Sixth Prince!

"Are you the 'Seven Freaks of Jiangnan'?" he demanded, to give himself some breathing space.

"Indeed," Zhu Cong replied, laughing. "Who are you?"

"We are the disciples of the 'Dragon King of the Demonic Group'."

The 'Freaks' were very surprised, for, given that these individuals had openly abused their numerical superiority, they believed that they must be vagabonds without a master. But the 'Dragon King of the Demonic Group', Sha Tongtian, is a weighty personality in the martial arts world.

"Are you misusing that name, or not?" Ke Zhen'E demanded in an icy voice. "The 'Dragon King of the Demonic Group' is a renowned personage, how could he have disciples as miserable as you?"

"Misusing a name?" the axe man said. "This is Elder Brother Shen Qinggang, nicknamed 'Saber Breaks Down The Soul'; this is Second brother, Wu Qinglie, nicknamed 'Lance Seizes Life'; this is Third brother Ma Qingxiong, nicknamed 'Whip Captures Spirit'; and I, Qian Qingjian, am nicknamed 'Axe Buries Family'."

"So," Ke Zhen'E said, "it seems to be true. You really are the 'Four Demons of the Yellow River'. You occupy a certain position in the Jianghu world; how could you lower yourselves to attack four against one?"

Wu Qinglie said cunningly, "What, four against one?" he argued. "Isn't your disciple helped by all these Mongols? Indeed, we are four against several hundred!"

"Third brother," Qian Qingjian demanded of Ma Qingxiong, "this blind person appears to be very boastful. Who is he?"

He had asked the question in a low voice but Ke Zhen'E heard him. Very upset, he leapt forward and struck with his staff at Qian. Grabbing him by the collar he threw him to the bottom of the hill. Ke Zhen'E, already among them, grasped them one after the other and pitched them far away. The Mongolian soldiers called out joyfully. The 'Four Demons of the Yellow River', covered with sand, rose painfully to their feet with their limbs aching and shame on their faces.

At that moment, immense dust clouds rose in the distance, as if tens of thousands of horsemen were coming. A flutter of nervousness immediately moved through Senggum's army.

Temujin, delighted to see reinforcements arriving, knew that iron discipline reigned in the army of Jamuka. Its officers and soldiers were all battle hardened. Senggum, protected by the reputation of his father, was a less

formidable commander in chief. Temujin pointed to the left wing of Senggum's army and shouted, "Attack in that direction!"

Jebe, Borchu, Jochi and Chagatai signaled the first ones. One could hear the faraway cries of the warriors of the relief column. Muqali swept his saber down on the nape of the neck of Dukhsh and shouted, "Get out of the way! Get out of the way!"

Senggum, who was going to order his men to intercept them, hesitated upon seeing that his son menaced. In a wink, Temujin's small troop moved to the foot of the hill. Jebe carefully aimed and loosed an arrow headed for Senggum's head. He shielded himself quickly, but the projectile struck his left cheek and he tumbled down from his mount. Seeing their chieftain fall, his men made their escape in pitiful disarray.

Temujin and his companions broke out of the siege, firing arrows at those that pursued them. Several li away, in the cloud of dust, was Tolui and his soldiers. The pursuers had always feared the bravery of Temujin. Now that they no longer had the advantage of numbers, they turned tail.

It turned out that because Tolui was young, the chieftains and generals refused to obey him since he didn't have Temujin's command seal. He could only convince a few thousand young soldiers to follow him here. He then conceived the idea of attaching branches to the tails of the horses, so that quantity of dust thus raised concealed the number of his soldiers. The ploy was a success.

Temujin's army returned to his camp. On the way they met Hua Zheng leading a small company of soldiers. When she saw that they were unharmed, she was so happy that she wouldn't stop talking.



That evening, Temujin gave a large banquet to reward his soldiers, but he placed Dukhsh in the place of honor, which caused general indignation. The Khan offered three toasts to pay homage to Dukhsh and said, "Ong Khan, my adoptive father, and my brother Senggum have always treated me well. There is no reason for hatred between our families. Please present my excuses to them, which will be accompanied with gifts of great value. I won't hold a grudge against you because of what you have done. After you return, you will prepare for your marriage to my daughter. We will hold a great feast and we will invite the chiefs of all the tribes. There will be great rejoicing. You will be my son-in-law and thus my son. From now on the two families must be united as one and not let themselves be divided by gossip."

Dukhsh, relieved at not being killed, accepted all that was offered. He noticed that when Temujin spoke, he kept his right hand on his chest under his tunic, and coughed nonstop. He wondered, "Could it be that he's wounded?"

"This day," the Khan said, "I was hit by an arrow. It will take three months to recuperate before I'm healthy again; if this hadn't happened, I would accompany you back myself. He withdrew his hand from under his tunic; it was covered with blood! "There's no need to wait for my wound to heal before you get married. Otherwise...otherwise you'll have to wait too long."

All the officers present were amazed and outraged to see their Khan afraid and apprehensive about Ong Khan, and much too eager to marry Hua Zheng to Dukhsh. The son of the division commander that was part of Temujin's escort had been killed defending the hill. The commander, insane with anger, unsheathed his saber and wanted to kill Dukhsh. The Khan had him seized and beaten in front of Dukhsh, until he fainted, covered with blood.

“He will be imprisoned,” Temujin ordered, “and he will be beheaded with all of his family in three days time!” The following day, Dukhsh returned home, taking along two carts filled with gold and furs, a thousand fat sheep, one hundred war horses, and escorted by fifty soldiers. Temujin also sent an emissary known for his eloquence, to plead his cause with Ong Khan and Senggum. At the time of the departure, Temujin, who seemed not to have the strength to ride a horse, arrived on a stretcher and bade him farewell, still coughing.

Eight days later, Temujin brought his officers together. “Gather your soldiers,” he ordered, “we will attack Ong Khan!” All the officers looked aghast. He continued, “Ong Khan has a very large army, whereas we are few. If you can’t win a frontal battle, a ruse is needed. I let Dukhsh go, heaping him with gifts, while I pretended to be wounded by an arrow and near death. I did all that to take him off guard!”

The officers expressed their admiration. At this moment, Temujin freed the commander he had beaten and gave him a large reward. Learning that the army was going to attack Ong Khan, the commander felt joy. He knelt down to express his thanks and asked for the honor of commanding the vanguard, which Temujin granted him. The army of the Khan was divided into three columns, which marched during the night using little used trails and bivouacked during the day. When they met shepherds, they took them captive and brought them along, to avoid any indiscriminate talk.

In the beginning, Ong Khan and Senggum, fearing that Temujin would come to seek revenge, kept their guard up. But the triumphal return of Dukhsh, the gifts he brought back, the servile remarks of the emissary and the news of the serious wound to the Khan reassured them completely.

They even withdrew their forward sentinels and spent their time feasting with Wanyan Honglie and Jamuka. One night, the three columns of Temujin's army fell on them like lightning! The many soldiers of Ong Khan and Jamuka, panic stricken, lost much of their combativeness and the battle turned into a rout. Ong Khan and Senggum fled towards the west where they were killed shortly after by the Naïman and Liao. In the confusion, Dukhsh was trampled by horses.

Wanyan Honglie, for his part, escaped in the middle of the night, in the protection of the 'Four Demons of the Yellow River' and headed back to the Jin capital. Abandoned by his soldiers, Jamuka took refuge at Tangnu Mountain with his five bodyguards. They betrayed him and brought him to Temujin. Temujin was furious, "Bodyguards who betray their master!" he cried. "How can I let such people live?" He ordered them decapitated in front of Jamuka. Then he turned to Jamuka, "Shall we become friends again?"

"Even if you spare my life," answered Jamuka with tears in his eyes, "I haven't the honor left to live in this world. I only beg that you let me die without bloodshed, so that my soul will not leave my body."

[According to the beliefs of the shamans, the soul resides in the blood. Princes that are to be killed but still honored were put to death by strangulation.]

Temujin remained sadly silent for a long time. "Well," he finally said, "I agree to such a death and I will bury you at the place where we played as children. Jamuka knelt before him, then rose and left the ger. A few days later, Temujin united the tribes on the banks of the Onon River in a kuriltai (general assembly). The river's fame stretched beyond the steppe, and the tribes, warriors and all the shepherds fear and revere it. Ong Khan and Jamuka's men

had been integrated into Temujin's army. During the kuriltai, Temujin was acclaimed Grand Khan of all Mongolia; he carried, from that time on, the title of 'Genghis Khan', which meant 'Supreme Chief'.

Genghis Khan rewarded the most deserving soldiers: the Four Aces, Muqali, Borchu, Boroquul, Tchila'un, while the officers, Jebe, Jelme and Subotai were made generals. During the battle, Guo Jing had rendered exceptional service and he was made a general as well! A young man, who had not yet reached twenty years of age, was regarded as an equal to officers of great reputation! During the banquet, Genghis Khan accepted homage from his faithful ones and drank without restraint. Slightly drunk, he said to Guo Jing, "My good boy, I will give you the most valuable thing I have." Guo Jing knelt down to thank him. "I give Hua Zheng to you," Genghis Khan said. "From tomorrow onwards, you will be the Golden Saber Prince. [Jin Dao Fu Ma]"

All the warriors let out cries of joy and congratulated the young man, "Son-in-law, wearing the large golden knife! Well done, hurrah!"

The happiest with all this was, without any doubt, Tolui, who embraced his sworn brother. But the person at the center of interest remained dazzled. He had always regarded Hua Zheng as his sister and he did not feel any other kind of love. He had devoted all his time to martial arts; when had he time to think of other things? The words of Genghis Khan distressed him and he didn't know what to do. Seeing him speechless, everyone burst out laughing.

After the banquet, Guo Jing went to inform his mother. Li Ping remained thoughtful for a long time, and then asked him to invite the Six Freaks from Jiangnan to their ger. They were delighted to see their beloved disciple covered with

honors and they congratulated his mother. But she did not say a word. Then she fell suddenly to her knees in front of the Six.

"Please rise," they protested. "If you have something to say to us, do so, why such ceremony?"

Han Xiaoying helped her up. "Thanks to the teachings of the six Shifus," Li Ping said, "my child finally became a man. I can never express my gratitude to all of you. But now, I face a difficulty and I need your enlightened counsel." She then told about the marriage which had been arranged by her late husband and his sworn brother, Yang Tiexin. "That the Khan wants my son to be his son-in-law," she began again, "is of course a great honor. But if Brother Yang had a girl and I do not keep my husband's promise, how could I, in the underworld, face my husband and Brother Yang?"

"You don't have to worry," Zhu Cong said laughing. "The honorable Yang actually has a descendant, but it is not a girl...it's a boy!"

Li Ping was astonished and delighted at the same time. "How do you know, Zhu Shifu?"

"A friend, who remained in the Central Plains, wrote to inform us. By the way, he wishes that we take Jing'er to Jiangnan to meet the son of Yang, and to compare their kung fu."

The Six Freaks had never made known to Li Ping and her son about the challenge with Qiu Chuji. Whenever Guo Jing raised questions about the young Taoist Yin Zhiping, they merely murmured something without really answering. Knowing the kind nature of their disciple, they thought that, were he suddenly to know the story of Yang Kang, he would not show all of his potential at the time of the combat; it would distort the competition irretrievably.

Zhu Cong's words charmed Li Ping. She asked if the Mrs. Yang was still in this world, and asked questions about the character of Yang Kang, but the Six were unable to answer her. Li Ping and the 'Six Freaks' decided that the six would take Guo Jing to Jiangnan to meet Yang Kang. At the same time they would try to find Duan Tiande and seek vengeance. Afterwards they would come back and Guo Jing would marry Hua Zheng. Guo Jing went to report this arrangement to Genghis Khan.

"Well," Temujin said. "Since you go to the south, will you bring back the head of the Sixth Jin Prince, Wanyan Honglie, for me? My sworn brother Jamuka betrayed me and lost his life, and it's the fault of that scum. How many men do you need to achieve this mission?"

After unifying the Mongolian tribes, Genghis Khan posed a serious threat to the Jin Empire. Confrontation would take place sooner or later, it was inevitable. Having met Wanyan Honglie on several occasions, Temujin knew his intelligence and his competence, so it was important that he be gotten rid of as soon as possible. As for his break with Jamuka, the true reasons were elsewhere; he had uprooted traditions, had left the spoils of war to his own warriors, and had sought to attract Jamuka's soldiers to his own army. The truth was, they both broke their oath of fidelity and they did not want to recognize their responsibilities and preferred to blame it on Wanyan Honglie.

Throughout his childhood, Guo Jing's mother had told him stories about the past and he had developed a great hatred towards the Jin. This was reinforced by his battle with the 'Four Demons of the Yellow River' who were employed by Wanyan Honglie. Thinking of an answer to Genghis Khan's question, he said to himself, "If my six Shifus will lend me a hand, certainly my mission will be a success. If I take along brave soldiers who do not know martial arts, they are likely

to be a hindrance.” He then answered, “If my six Shifus accompany me, I won't need anybody else.”

“Very well,” Genghis Khan said. “We are still weak at the moment and we cannot face the Jin Empire directly. It will be necessary for you to be careful and not to let them guess our intentions.”

Guo Jing agreed. The Khan gave him ten taels of gold for his journey and offered the Six Freaks a part of the spoils plundered from Ong Khan. Learning that he was to leave on a mission to the south, all of Guo Jing's Mongol friends also offered gifts to him.

“My Anda,” Tolui reminded, “the people of the south don't keep their word, you must be careful, and not get duped ...”

At dawn three days later, Guo Jing and his Shifus left for the grave of Zhang Ahsheng to pay homage. Then they returned to bid farewell to Li Ping before taking the road to the south. Li Ping watched the tall silhouette of her son riding the small red horse as it disappeared on the steppe. She thought of his birth on that desolate battlefield, and felt her heart tighten with concern and sadness.

After riding about ten li, Guo Jing saw two white eagles soaring in the sky; Tolui and Hua Zheng had come to bid him farewell. Tolui offered him a valuable coat of flawless black sable which he had taken from Ong Khan. Hua Zheng, with glowing cheeks, looked at her future husband without saying anything.

“Oh go ahead, little sister,” Tolui said, “speak to him! I will not listen to what you'll say!” He burst out laughing and moved away.

Hua Zheng bowed her head, not finding anything to say... “Return quickly!” she finally murmured.

Guo Jing nodded his head. "What else do you want to say to me?" he asked. She shook her head. "Then, I'll go ..." She lowered her head without saying another word.

Guo Jing leaned over, lightly pressed her to him, then rode towards Tolui and hugged him also. Then he urged his horse into a gallop in order to catch up with his six Shifus who were already far ahead.

Him being so formal and not showing any tenderness, even though they were promised in marriage and he was traveling faraway, Hua Zheng felt a surge of anger. As she rode off she violently whipped her horse even though the poor animal had nothing to do with the situation ...



## Chapter 7 - Joust to Find a Spouse

Translated by Strunf, Patudo, Dugu Seeking a Win and SunnySnow



*Guo Jing snatched the 'joust to find a spouse' banner and swept the banner pole across the*

*length of his arm; the banner flipped over the Young Prince's face. The Young Prince slanted his body aside and raised his spear. With a red circling shadow and a flickering spearhead he thrust the spear at Guo Jing.*

The 'Six Freaks of Jiangnan' and Guo Jing took the southeastern route. The journey promised to be long and many days passed before they'd even left the steppe. One day, they were not very far from Zhangjiakou [known as Kalgan at this time]. It was the first time that Guo Jing had put his feet on Chinese soil; everything was new to him and he was full of enthusiasm. He loosened his hold on the reins of his horse and it ran so quickly that the wind whistled in his ears and the landscape changed quickly before his amazed eyes. The little red horse galloped without interruption until he reached the Black River [Amur River or Heilong Jiang], then Guo Jing stopped at a roadside hostel in order to wait for his masters.

After this long run, the horse was covered with sweat, so Guo Jing took a handkerchief to wipe it down. He was stunned to see traces of blood on the handkerchief! After passing his hand along its neck, he saw more blood when he withdrew it. He almost burst into tears, blaming himself for not stopping his horse and not taking better care of it. He was the one responsible for its loss! He embraced the horse and caressed him nearly one thousand times; yet somehow, the animal seemed to be very healthy and didn't appear to be suffering any ill affects.

While waiting for his Third Shifu, who would properly care for the horse, he couldn't stop turning his head toward the road, hoping to see him. Suddenly he heard the tinkling of bells as four snow white camels arrived running full speed

on the road. Each was ridden by an individual clothed in white. Guo Jing had grown up near the steppe, but he had never seen any camels as beautiful and couldn't stop staring fixedly at them. The four camel riders, of about twenty years in age, had similar faces with fine lines and attractiveness; a type of beauty rarely seen in Mongolia. With graceful agility they got down from their mounts to enter the hostel. Guo Jing could not take his eyes off them.

One of the four, embarrassed by his staring, blushed and lowered her head. Another one, who was bolder, got angry, "Little fool! Why do you look at us like that?"

Guo Jing, taken aback, turned his head in embarrassment. The newcomers whispered in low voices and laughed. "Congratulations!" one said to another. "You really dazzled that fool!"

Guo Jing knew that the speaker ridiculed him and felt ashamed. His cheeks turned red. Just as he was wondering if he should remain or leave, Han Baoju arrived on his stallion 'Wind Chaser'. The young man hastened to tell his Shifu of his misadventure with his horse.

"How is this possible?" Han Baoju wondered. He approached the horse, caressed it, examined his hand attentively, and then exploded in laughter. "It's not blood," he said, "it's sweat!"

"Sweat?" Guo Jing stammered, almost speechless. "Red sweat?"

"Jing'er, it is a horse that sweats blood, a rare beast and of inestimable value!" Guo Jing, happy beyond belief to learn that his horse was not injured asked, "Third Shifu, how can sweat look like blood?"

"I heard from my late Shifu, that there existed in the kingdom of Ferghana [a central Asian Valley, shared today by Uzbekistan, Kirghizstan and Tajikistan.] in the Territories of the west, celestial horses whose sweat was red as blood. At a gallop they looked like they were flying and could cover more than one thousand li per day. But that was just a story and since no one had ever seen one, I didn't believe it myself. However, here is this legendary animal and it let himself be tamed by you!"

By this time, the other Freaks had also arrived. They took a room in the hostel then ordered something to eat. Zhu Cong, whose learning was incomparable, said while nodding his head, "It is an anecdotal story confined to historic records in the dynastic history of the Han. The story tells that the Emperor Han Wudi, having heard rumors of the horse that sweats blood, sent an emissary to the Kingdom of Ferghana with a full size gold statue of the animal. The emissary asked to have one of them but the king of Ferghana refused."

"How did the emperor react?" Han Xiaoying asked. "Did he give up on having the horse?" Sitting at another table, the camel riders in white, turned to listen to the story. At that moment, more bells were heard and four more individuals, also clothed in white, entered and sat down with the others.

"Of course not," Zhu Cong said. "He became enraged and invaded Ferghana. He began a long and vicious war, during which the kingdom was destroyed. He finally captured one of the famous horses, but at such a price!" All commented on the madness of men and continued to eat.

The eight camel riders had listened to the story attentively and gave covetous looks at the red horse tied outside. They kept whispering in low voices. Ke Zhen'E, whose hearing

was especially acute, heard them distinctly even though the tables were relatively distant from each other.

"If we're going to take it," one of them said, "we need to do it right away. If he rides his horse again, we won't be able to catch him!"

"There are too many people here," retorted another. "And he has some friends..."

"If they dare to interfere," said a third, "we'll have to kill them all!"

"How can these eight individuals scheme so cruelly?" Ke Zhen'E wondered, but he didn't let anything show and continued to swallow his food greedily.

"We will offer this precious horse to the young Master," one of them said. "Mounted on such beast, his arrival in Yanjing will be a lot more spectacular! No one will be talked of as much as him, not even vain people like the 'Ginseng Immortal' or the 'Virtuous Supreme Lingzhi'!"

Ke Zhen'E heard them speak of the 'Virtuous Supreme Lingzhi', who was an eminent personality from a secret school in Tibet, known in the whole of the southwest for his technique 'Stamp of a Big Hand'. On the other hand, he didn't know anything about the 'Ginseng Immortal'.

"These past few days," another said, "we met a lot of outlaws on the road; they were all Peng Lianhu's men. They call him 'Butcher of One Thousand Hands'. They are probably going to the gathering in Yanjing. If they happen on this precious horse, do you think that we'll get another chance to take it?"

Ke Zhen'E froze. He knew that Peng Lianhu was a dangerous outlaw chief who terrorized the region of Hubei

and Shanxi. He had many henchmen under his command and acted with cruelty. He had killed so many people that he had received the nickname 'Butcher of the One Thousand Hands'. "Why," he wondered, "are all these sinister outlaws going to meet in the capital? And where did these eight women come from?"

The women continued to plot in low voices and decided to lie in ambush on the road outside of the town, in order to seize Guo Jing's horse. Then they chattered, talking of clothes and other things of that kind. "It's you that the young Master prefers", or "The young Master must be thinking about you now", etc. Ke Zhen'E angrily raised his eyebrows, but he could not close his ears and he heard everything in spite of himself.

"If we offer the blood sweating horse to the young Master," asked one of them, "what reward do you think he is going to give us?"

"He is surely going to spend more nights with you," answered another, laughing.

The first sulkily protested, and they continued to bicker while laughing. "Be quiet," one of them said. "Don't reveal our intentions, because they don't look to be that easy to..."

"The woman over there," another said in a low voice, "carries a sword; she practices martial arts for sure. And she is rather good looking! If she were ten years younger, the young Master would certainly be interested in her!"

Ke Zhen'E knew that they were speaking of Han Xiaoying and felt even angrier. "This 'young Master' that they speak of can't be someone very admirable!" The eight women finished their meal, mounted their camels and left.

After their departure, Ke Zhen'E asked Guo Jing, "Jing'er, what do you think of the abilities of those eight women?"

"What women?" Guo Jing wondered.

"They were disguised as men," Zhu Cong explained, "but you didn't realize it, did you?"

"Who knows of the 'Mount of the White Camel'?" Ke Zhen'E asked. No one had heard of it. Ke told them of the conversation that he had heard. The other Freaks decided that these shameless women didn't lack boldness, but their audacity in wanting to tackle someone stronger than them was something to laugh at.

"Two among them," Han Xiaoying said, "have big noses and green eyes; they probably aren't Chinese..."

"Very true," confirmed Han Baoju. "And those pure white camels only exist in the territories of the west."

"That they want to steal the horse," Ke Zhen'E said, "is not too serious, but they also said that numerous dangerous personalities are going to a meeting in Yanjing. It may involve an important plot to harm the Song dynasty. It could have disastrous consequences for our people! Since we accidentally discovered this business, we cannot wash our hands of it."

"Certainly not," Quan Jinfa said, "but the appointment at Jiaxing is near, we can't waste any time." They hesitated, because it appeared impossible to reconcile the two missions.

"Jing'er goes there first," Nan Xiren suddenly said.

"What Fourth brother wants to say" Han Xiaoying interpreted, "is that Jing'er must go to Jiaxing alone, and

that we will join him once we have dealt with this matter in Yanjing." Nan Xiren nodded his head.

"It's true," Zhu Cong said, "it is time that Jing'er traveled alone to acquire some experience by himself..." The young man was saddened to part with his Shifus.

"You are now grown up," Ke Zhen'E reprimanded. "Don't behave like a child!"

"You go and wait for us there," Han Xiaoying said, comforting him. "In less than one month, we will join you."

"We didn't explain the appointment in Jiaxing in detail to you before," Zhu Cong said. "When the time arrives, on the twenty-fourth day of the third lunar month, at noon, you absolutely must be at the 'Pavilion of the Drunken Immortal', even if the sky falls on your head!" Guo Jing agreed.

"Those eight women want to steal your horse," Ke Zhen'E continued. "Don't look for a fight; your horse is fast and they won't be able to catch up to you. You have important things to attend to, so don't get involved in useless distractions."

"If those women dare to cause any trouble," Han Baoju said, "the 'Seven Freaks of Jiangnan' will stop them!"

Zhang Ahsheng died more than ten years ago, but the six still called themselves the 'Seven Freaks', never forgetting to associate their dead brother with all their actions.

Guo Jing bade farewell to his teachers. They had witnessed his battle with the 'Four Demons of the Yellow River', and were not greatly worried for his safety. The young man had proved that he knew how to use the skills that had been taught to him. Therefore they let him leave alone. On one



hand, the meeting of the outlaws in Yanjing worried them greatly and they couldn't just ignore it. On the other hand, a youngster has to travel Jianghu alone, in order to learn lessons that no teacher can pass on.

At the moment of parting, each gave his last bit of advice. As usual, when the Six spoke, Nan Xiren was the last one to express himself, "If you cannot defeat an enemy," he said. "Flee!"

Knowing Guo Jing's determined nature, he knew that he would rather die than to surrender. If he met a master, he would certainly fight to the bitter end, even at the risk of death. That was the reason Nan Xiren gave him this common-sense warning.

"The martial arts have no limits," Zhu Cong added. "As the proverb says: 'For every peak there is one higher', so for every man there is someone stronger. Whatever your power, you will one day meet a foe stronger than you. A true man knows to retreat when necessary. When facing grave danger, it is necessary to contain one's impetuosity and anger. This is what is meant by the adage: 'If one preserves the earth and its forests, one does not fear the lack of firewood.' It is not cowardly to take good advice! When the enemy is too numerous and you cannot face them, it is very necessary to avoid being too reckless. Keep in mind Fourth Shifu's advice!"

Guo Jing agreed and kowtowed to his teachers before mounting his horse to head for the south. He felt great sadness at parting from his masters with whom he had lived every day for the past ten years. Tears rolled down his cheeks. He thought also of his mother, whom he had left alone on the steppe. Of course, she didn't lack for anything, since Genghis Khan and Tolui had promised to look after

her, but his loneliness weighed upon him nonetheless, and he worried for her.

After traveling about ten li, he arrived in a mountainous region. The road wound along the bottom of a valley dominated by craggy slopes dotted with strange boulders. Since it was the first time that he had faced the outside world, he could not help but feel a little apprehensive at the sight of this threatening landscape. With one hand on the hilt of his sword, he paused and smiled, "If Third Shifu saw me thus, trembling and terrified, he would certainly make fun of me!"

The road climbed the mountain flank, becoming narrower and serpentine. Rounding a bend, he suddenly became aware of a group of white shapes in front of him; four women clothed in white, mounted on white camels, blocked the road. Guo Jing, pulling back the reins of his horse, halted. From a distance, he shouted, "Excuse me! May I please pass?"

The four women laughed. "Little man," one of them replied. "What do you fear? Why don't you come over! We won't eat you!" Red-faced, Guo Jing did not know what to do. Could he amicably negotiate passage, or would it be necessary to rush forward and make the pass by force of arms?

"Your horse is not a bad animal," another woman said. "Come here; let me have a look at him!" She spoke to him as if to a little child. Guo Jing felt anger rise within him, but the layout of the terrain worried him. To his right rose a craggy cliff, to the left, there was a mist-covered precipice, whose bottom could not be seen.

"Eldest Shifu," he said to himself, "has given me good advice not to seek trouble. If I ride at them swiftly, those girls will be obliged to let me pass!" He lashed his reins,

pressed with his thighs, and the red horse sped forward like an arrow. Sword in hand, Guo Jing cried, "Listen to me, you people! Let me pass! If someone is jostled and falls from the precipice, it won't be my fault!" In the blink of an eye, he arrived in front of the four women. They had leapt down from their camels and attempted to seize the bridle of the horse. With a whinny, the horse leapt over the camels! Guo Jing had the impression that he was flying in the clouds as he landed beyond his opponents, who were just as surprised as him!

Hearing them scream out in anger, he turned and saw the flash of two projectiles flying toward him. This being his first time traveling the Jianghu, he had taken heed of the prudent advice of his masters. Worried that the missiles were poisoned, he did not wish to seize them with his bare hand. He waved his leather cap and intercepted them.

"Well done!" two of the women called. "Pretty good kung fu!"

Guo Jing dipped his head and saw, inside his cap, two silver darts tipped with extremely sharp fish bones. Deadly weapons! He felt both disturbed and upset. "There is no ill-will between us," he said to himself. "You covet only my horse and yet you are ready to mortally injure me!" He placed the missiles in his pouch, and fearing to meet the other four women, he slackened his horse's reins, not holding it back any longer. It galloped like the wind and in less than an hour had covered 80 li. The other assailants must have been lying in ambush further down the road, but he passed by so quickly that they did not have the time to launch it. After a brief rest, he continued on. Before night fell again, he had arrived in Kalgan [the Mongolian name for Zhangjiakou], sure that he had left those following him far behind.

Kalgan, at the crossroads of commerce between the South and the North, was a small but very lively city, where the trade of the region was centered, especially the fur trade. Holding his red horse by the reins, Guo Jing glanced right and left with great curiosity. Never had he seen a town of such importance and everything appeared strange and new to him. Arriving in front of a large restaurant he felt the pangs of hunger. He tied up his horse in front of the door and went in. Once seated at a table, he ordered a dish of beef, with two pancakes, and having a good appetite, he ate in the Mongol manner, wrapping the meat in the pancake and taking bites out of it. While he satisfied his hunger, he suddenly heard a disturbance at the door of the inn. Fearing for his mount, he rushed to the doorway.

The little red horse was quietly eating its fodder while two inn boys were scolding a young, slender boy, clothed in rags. He appeared to be fifteen or sixteen years of age and on his head he wore an old leather hat with many holes. His face and hands were dirty; so much so that one could not distinguish his features clearly. He held a big bun in his hand and laughed foolishly, revealing two rows of beautiful white teeth that seemed out-of-place in comparison with his general appearance. His black, very lively eyes, shone with intensity.

“Hey you!” one of the boys screamed. “Get lost!”

“Sure.” the young lad said, “Since you want me to go, I’ll go...” As he turned on his heels the other inn boy interrupted, “Leave the bun!” He handed the bun back, but it was covered with the marks of dirty fingers and could no longer be sold. The inn boy was furious and launched a blow with his fist that the boy ducked.

Guo Jing, feeling pity for him and thinking that he had to be hungry, interposed himself. “There’s no need for violence,”

he said. "Put that on my account!"

He took the bun and gave it to the young man who took it and said, "This bun is no good! Poor thing, this is for you!" He threw the bun to a small skinny dog that started to devour it.

"What a waste!" the inn boy disgustedly said, "giving a dog such a good bun!"

Guo Jing was taken aback, for he had believed that the boy suffered from hunger... He returned to his table to continue his meal. The young man followed him inside the establishment and stayed there, looking at him fixedly. Guo Jing felt a little bothered and asked, "Do you want to eat here, too?"

"Gladly," replied the young man with a laugh. "I was bored being all alone and I've been looking for a buddy..."

He had a Jiangnan accent and its familiarity delighted Guo Jing. In fact, his mother was from Lin'an, in Zhejiang province, and the Freaks all came from Jiaying. Since childhood he had been immersed in the accent of Jiangnan. The young boy seated himself at the table. Guo Jing called the waiter. When he saw the rags and dirtiness of the new guest, the look on his face was not very nice. It was necessary to call him several times before he finally, dragging his feet, brought over a bowl and plate.

"You take me for a pauper," the young boy said, "and unworthy to eat here. Pah! Even should you serve me your finest dish, who knows if it'll be to my taste?"

"Ah yes," the waiter said coldly. "We will assuredly follow your orders, sir. The problem is that we don't know if anyone will pay!"

"Whatever I order," the boy demanded of Guo Jing, "will you treat me?"

"Of course...of course!" Guo Jing replied. He then told the waiter, "Quickly cut up a plate of roast beef and a half plate of mutton liver!" To him, roast beef and mutton liver constituted the ultimate in delicacies... "Do you drink wine?" he asked the boy.

"Wait," the boy replied. "Don't rush into the meat. Let us begin first with fruit. Eh, waiter! First we'll have four dry fruits, four fresh fruits, two salted sweetened ones, and four preserved fruit in honey."

Not expecting such an order the waiter was shocked,. "Which fruit and sweets do you wish, sir?" he inquired.

"In this little establishment, in this pathetic little town," the boy said, "I imagine it's impossible for you to come up with anything great. We'll have to content ourselves with lesser things. The four dry fruit are lichis, longans, steamed jujubes and ginkgos. For the fresh, you will choose seasonal fruits. For the salted sweetened, perfumed cherries and plums and filaments of ginger, but I don't know if you'll find those here. As for the honey preserved fruit, you will bring rose perfumed tangerines, preserved grapes, sugar frosted peaches, and pear slices." This knowledge of culinary matters impressed the waiter, who no longer dared to act superior.

"There are no fresh fish or fresh shrimp to accompany the wine," continued the boy, "so I will be content with eight average... dishes."

"What else do you desire, sir?" asked the waiter.

"Of course," said the boy with a sigh. "If I don't explain all the tiniest details, you will be incapable of doing anything

properly! Here are the eight dishes: steamed pheasant, fried ducks feet, chicken tongue soup, deer stomach in rice wine, beef ribs with chives, rabbit in chrysanthemum petals, stir-fried thigh of wild boar, and pork feet in ginger vinegar... I'm choosing simple dishes only; it's not worth mentioning more sophisticated ones." The waiter's mouth gaped.

"Those eight dishes," he said, "are rather expensive! For the duck feet and the chicken tongue soup, we will require a lot of poultry!"

"The gentleman is paying," the boy responded, pointing at Guo Jing, "Do you believe that he does not have the means?"

The waiter saw that Guo Jing wore a sable coat of great value. "Even if you have no means of payment," he thought to himself, "this coat will suffice to cover the expenditure!" Then he demanded, "Is that all?"

"You will also bring," the boy said, "twelve more dishes to accompany the rice and eight different dimsum." The waiter didn't dare to ask for details concerning the dishes, fearing that the boy would order dishes he could not provide. He went to the kitchen and told the cooks to prepare the best.

"Which wine do the gentlemen wish?" he returned to ask. "We have clear rice wine ten years of age. What would you say to two horns to start?"

"Why not," the boy said.

A little later the waiter brought fruits and cookies. Guo Jing tasted each plate and marveled at all these delicious things he had never known of. The boy talked continuously, telling of local customs and habits, describing famous characters

and anecdotes about the country of the South. Guo Jing was fascinated by his eloquence and his immense knowledge. Guo Jing's Second Shifu was a well-read man and a great scholar, but Guo Jing, who had devoted all of his time and energy to martial arts, and had only learned from Zhu Cong, during their rare free time, some basic characters. It seemed to him that this young boy was as cultivated as his Second Shifu and he was filled with wonder. "I believe," he thought, "that what seems a poor beggar is in reality a well-read man of culture. The people in China are definitely quite different from those in Mongolia."

Half an hour later the dishes were ready. It took two large tables together in order to serve them all. The young boy drank very little and ate in the same way and was satisfied with picking at the less spicy dishes. Suddenly, he called to the waiter and thundered, "This rice wine is five years old! How do you dare to serve it with the food?"

"Your palate is really very refined!" the manager came begging for forgiveness. "Please excuse us. The fact is, our humble establishment did not have it, and it was necessary to borrow some from the nearest larger restaurant, The House of Eternal Celebration. In general, one does not find aged wine in Kalgan."

The young boy made a gesture to remove it and resumed his conversation with Guo Jing, asking him a thousand questions about the steppe and Mongolia. Since his Shifus had urged him to be discreet so as not to reveal his identity, he was content to tell anecdotes of hunting for hares and wolves, shooting eagles, horse races etc. The boy listened with fascination, applauding the sharpest accounts and often bursting into fresh and childish laughter.

Guo Jing had lived all his life on the steppe. He had certainly had a close friendship with Tolui and Hua Zheng.



But Temujin, who loved his youngest son very much, often kept his son near him, so that Tolui didn't have much time for play. As for Hua Zheng, she had a headstrong character and often quarreled with Guo Jing, who was reluctant to do everything she wanted. Although they always reconciled in the end, the relationship wasn't an easy one. However, it was very different with this young boy; they were eating and conversing so that Guo Jing, without knowing why, felt a joy he'd never experienced before.

Usually he spoke little and expressed himself with difficulty. A person needed to ask him questions that forced him to hesitatingly answer. Han Xiaoying gently made fun of him by saying that he was the preferred disciple of his Fourth Shifu, because he had adopted Nan Xiren's motto, "silence is golden". But now, surprisingly, he could talk nonstop, not hiding anything of his life, except his martial arts training and things related to Temujin. He even told of all silly and stupid things. He spoke easily and, at a certain moment, forgot himself and grabbed the left hand of his questioner. He was surprised because this hand was soft, smooth and so flexible it seemed boneless. The boy smiled slightly and bowed his head. Guo Jing noticed that, whereas the boy's face was smudged with dirt, the skin at the nape of his neck had the whiteness of jade. Guo Jing found this a bit strange, but he did not give it further thought.

"Well we've chatted for such a long time," the boy said, withdrawing his hand, "everything is cold now, the dishes and also the rice ..."

"Yes," Guo Jing said, "but it is not spoiled. It is still good ..."  
The boy shook his head. "Then we'll get it warmed up ..."

"No," the boy said, "When it's warmed up it isn't good anymore ..." He called the waiter, ordered him to throw everything away and prepare new dishes with fresh

ingredients. The manager, the cooks and waiters found this attitude quite strange, but they did it readily. The Mongols show extreme hospitability to their guests, and besides, it was the first time in his life that Guo Jing handled money and he didn't know its value. But even if he had known, he got along so well with the boy and he felt such pleasure in his company, he would have spent ten times as much without batting an eye. The new dishes were served and after a few mouthfuls he had had enough.

"You are really an idiot," the waiter thought, "This little urchin has taken advantage of you." He brought the bill, which amounted to nineteen taels, seventy-four bao. Guo Jing took out a gold ingot [yuan bao] and ordered the waiter to exchange it for taels at the money changer after which he paid for the food. As they left the restaurant the north wind blew strongly. The young boy seemed to feel the cold. He shivered and said, "I've disturbed you enough... Now, it's goodbye."

Seeing that the boy was not dressed warmly enough, Guo Jing felt concerned. He removed his black sable coat and covered the shoulders of the boy. "Brother," he said, "I feel like we've known each other forever. Please accept this coat." He had four gold ingots left; he took two and slipped them into the coat's pocket. Without even thanking him, the boy, wearing the sable coat, walked along dejectedly. After walking about ten steps, he turned and saw Guo Jing, holding his horse by its bridle, watching him. He knew that Guo Jing did not want to part like that; he made a gesture with his hand. Guo Jing approached him eagerly and asked, "Does the worthy brother still need something?"

"I haven't asked for the name of my big brother," said the boy smiling.

"That's true," Guo Jing said laughing, "we forgot about that. My name is Guo and Jing is my first name. And yours, brother?"

"My name is Huang and my first name is Rong."

"Where are you bound?" Guo Jing asked. "If you are heading towards the south, we could travel together. What do you think?"

"I'm not going south," Huang Rong said, shaking his head. Suddenly he said, "Big brother, I'm still hungry ..."

"Very well," Guo Jing happily said. "Let us eat something together."

This time, Huang Rong took him to the House of Eternal Celebration, the principal restaurant in Kalgan. Its decorations accurately imitated the great establishments of the ancient capital of Song, Bianliang [Kaifeng]. He did not order a feast this time, but only asked for four plates of fine pastry, a pot of longjin tea (aka Dragon's Well tea, famous green tea of the province Zhejiang), and they continued their rambling conversation.

Having learned that Guo Jing had tamed two white eagles, Huang Rong expressed a certain desire. "Very good," he said, "I did not know exactly where to go. Tomorrow I'll leave for Mongolia, to catch two white eagles for my amusement."

"They are not easy to find," Guo Jing remarked.

"Then how did you find them?"

Guo Jing didn't answer and only smiled. "The climate is severe in Mongolia," he thought, "and the north wind blows icy and hard, how would this slight young boy withstand it?"

"Where do you live?" he asked. "Why don't you return home?"

Huang Rong had tears in his eyes, "Dad doesn't want me anymore!"

"Why not?" Guo Jing asked.

"He locked somebody up," Huang Rong answered, "and did not wish to set that person free. I took pity on the prisoner because he was lonely; I brought good things for him to eat, and I tried to converse with him. Dad got angry and cursed at me, so I ran away in the middle of the night."

"I'm sure your dad thinks of you at this moment", Guo Jing said. "What of your mom?"

"She died a long time ago! I haven't had a mom since I was very small ..."

"If you've had your fun, it would be better to return home."

"Dad does not want me anymore," Huang Rong said crying.

"That's impossible!" Guo Jing said.

"Then why doesn't he look for me?"

"Perhaps he is still looking, but hasn't found you ..."

"You're probably right," Huang Rong said, who'd changed from crying to laughing. "When I've had my fun, I'll return. But first of all, I need to tame two white eagles!"

They chatted again about what they had seen or experienced. Guo Jing told of the incident with the eight women in white, disguised as men, and who wanted to take possession of his horse. Huang Rong asked questions about the small red horse, its capabilities, its character, and seemed full of envy. He drank a mouthful of tea and said

smilingly, "Big brother, I want to ask for something of great value to you. Would you agree to that?"

"Of course, why wouldn't I?"

"What I would like, is your horse that sweats blood!"

"All right," Guo Jing said without hesitating, "I'll give it to you gladly."

In fact, Huang Rong was joking. He knew very well that Guo Jing adored his invaluable horse. Since they had just recently met and by chance, he was curious to see how this good chap was going to refuse his improper request. However, Guo Jing answered with such generosity and simplicity that he was taken by surprise. Moved beyond words, he could not stop himself breaking into sobs and hiding his face with his arms. Guo Jing was even more surprised, "Brother," he asked with concern, "what's happened, don't you feel well?"

Huang Rong raised his head. He had been crying, but now a big smile lit his face. The running tears had washed away the dirt, revealing white skin like pure jade. "Big brother," he said, "let's go!"

Guo Jing paid and they left the restaurant. Guo Jing took his horse by its bridle caressing it gently and gave it the following advice, "I've given you to my good friend here. You will act obediently and especially do not show your foul temper!" Then he addressed Huang Rong, "Brother, mount the horse!"

The small red horse usually did not allow anyone else to mount it, but, during the past few days, it had quieted a lot. Since its master had ordered it to do so, it didn't make a fuss. Huang Rong leapt on the horse and Guo Jing let go of the bridle, and clapped him lightly on the rump. Rider and

horse disappeared in a cloud of dust. Guo Jing waited until he could see them no more before he turned back.

It was very late when he obtained a room at an inn. Just as he was going to extinguish his candle and to go to bed, he heard a scratch at the door. He thought that it was Huang Rong who had returned, and felt great joy. "Is that you, brother?" he asked. "That's great!"

"It's your old man!" replied a hoarse voice. "What's so great?"

Surprised, the young man opened the door and saw, by the glimmer of the candle, five men. Looking at them more closely, he felt a shiver go down his spine; four of them, armed with a saber, a lance, a whip and twin axes, were none other than the 'Four Demons of the Yellow River', whom he had previously fought on the hill. The fifth one was a lean man of about forty years, with a long dark face with three big lumps on his forehead that gave him an extremely ugly appearance. The lean man sneered and swept grandly into the room. He seated himself arrogantly on the bed of bricks [kang], then turned his head to regard Guo Jing. [In northern China, sleeping arrangements generally were installed on top of a kind of brick "oven", that allowed for heating underneath.]

The senior brother of the 'Four Demons of the Yellow River', Shen Qinggang, nicknamed 'Saber Breaks Down the Soul', declared coldly, "This is our martial uncle, the renowned Hou Tonghai, known as 'Three-Headed Dragon'! Kowtow before Lord Hou right now!"

Guo Jing realized that he was cornered. He could never defeat the 'Four Demons of the Yellow River' together, to say nothing of their martial uncle, who had to be fearsome.

"What do you want?" he demanded, while clasping his fists in greeting.

"Where are your teachers?" Hou Tonghai questioned.

"My six Shifus are not here."

"Huh," sneered Hou Tonghai. "Then I will give you a half-day respite. If I killed you now, people could say that the 'Three-Headed Dragon' was taking advantage of an opponent weaker than him. Tomorrow at noon, I will await your six Shifus in the 'Black Pine Wood', ten li to the west of here." He left without even waiting for Guo Jing's reply. Wu Qinglie, nicknamed 'Whip Captures Spirit', closed the door and locked it from the outside.

Guo Jing put out the candle, lay down on the bed, and saw, on the paper of the window, a shadow that came and went continuously. The enemy, clearly, were mounting a watch over him. A short time later, he heard a noise on the roof, someone was tapping the tiles with a weapon, while saying, "Little fellow, don't even think about running away, your old man is watching you." Knowing that escape was impossible, Guo Jing lay still, glancing at the ceiling, and wondering how he was going to leave tomorrow. He fell asleep before he found even the beginnings of a solution.

The next morning, the inn boy brought hot water for his bath and noodles for breakfast. He was closely followed by Qian Qingjian, armed with his two short axes. Guo Jing reflected that his Shifus were far away and probably would not arrive in time to save him. Since he could not flee, it would be necessary to fight and die like a man! His Fourth Shifu, who had advised him well, said, "If you can't beat the enemy, flee!" But to flee without even being beaten, would not be accurately following the advice... In fact, it would not have been difficult for him to escape from Qian Qingjian

alone, for he was not very quick or resourceful. If only Nan Xiren had said to him, "Flee from danger!" he probably would have taken to his heels, and Qian Qingjian certainly would not have been in any position to catch him. The 'Three-Headed Dragon', Hou Tonghai, believed that the 'Seven Freaks of Jiangnan' were located in this area, and that, given their fame, they never would fail to keep an appointment. He never would have imagined that Guo Jing would flee on his own.

Seated on the bed, he practiced meditation and controlled his breathing according to the pointers given to him by Ma Yu. Standing next to him, Qian Qingjian whirled his axes while shouting and criticizing his methods. Guo Jing paid no attention to him. Towards noon, he rose. "Let's go," he said to his jailer.

He paid his bill to the innkeeper and both headed to the west. Ten li further on, they indeed came across woods of thickly foliated pines. Qian Qingjian left Guo Jing and entered the woods.

The young man pulled out the supple whip that he always carried at his side and cautiously entered the undergrowth. Progressing slowly and watching carefully in all directions, he followed the small path for a little more than one li without seeing anyone. All was silent, with an occasional bird call now and then. As he advanced, his apprehension grew. "No one is watching me," he said reassuringly to himself, "and since the wood is so thick, why not hide? Hiding is not fleeing!" Just as he prepared to slip into a bush he heard swearing above his head, "Little bastard! Idiot! Moron!"

Guo Jing jumped back, his whip held at the ready. He looked up, and then burst out laughing; there, at the top of four big trees, the 'Four Demons of the Yellow River', hands tied



behind their backs and each hanging at the end of a rope, wriggled in the air. They struggled hopelessly but could not escape. Seeing Guo Jing, they renewed their cursing.

"You guys playing at swings?" Guo Jing asked, still laughing. "This is very funny, isn't it? Good-bye then, I'll take my leave." He took a few steps away, and then returned. "How did you guys end up like that?"

"Damn you!" Qian Qingjian growled. "We were taken by surprise; this is not worthy of a real man!"

"Little man," Shen Qinggang shouted, "if you're brave enough, let us down, and we will fight one on one to decide between us. If we all attacked you, we would be cowards!"

Guo Jing wasn't very intelligent, but neither was he completely stupid. He burst out laughing again and said, "I'll concede that you're brave, without needing to match blows!" Afraid that Hou Tonghai, the Three-Headed Dragon, might arrive, he had no desire to linger; he hastily departed and returned to the city. He bought a horse and resumed his journey south without delay.

"Who secretly helped me?" he asked himself. "Those 'Four Demons of the Yellow River' have excellent kung fu; who was it that succeeded in tying them up, and suspending them from the trees? And the Three-Headed Dragon that had seemed so frightening, why didn't I see him again? My Shifu always said, 'When an appointment is made, it is necessary to keep it, even if the sky falls on your head'. I kept his appointment; if he didn't arrive himself, that's not my fault."

The journey went on without incident. One day, he finally arrived in Yanjing. It was the capital of the Jin Empire and the most prosperous city in the country. Even the former capital of the Song, Bianliang, or the new one, Lin'an, could

not compare with it. Guo Jing, who had grown up on the steppe, had never seen anything even slightly similar. Red buildings of stunning architecture with decorated panels and majestic doors. Splendid attachments graced the front of the sumptuous residences. Fiery standards impeded passage in the streets. Merchandise of all sorts was displayed in immense stores. A colorful crowd of people in luxurious clothes crowded themselves in the tea parlors and the wine houses. The streets were full of brilliant signs, multicolored standards, and the air resounded with the sound of music. A hundred perfumes filled the air with fragrance. Guo Jing did not know where to turn his head. There were so many things before his eyes that he did not recognize one object out of ten!

Not daring to enter a restaurant that was too richly furnished, he chose a small stall where he ate quickly, then continued to walk randomly about. Suddenly, he heard continuous cheering and saw a crowd in the distance, massed around something.

Pressed on by his curiosity, he approached and slipped in amongst the onlookers. They pressed themselves around a wide open area, in the middle of which was planted an ornamental standard with the phrase 'Joust to Find a Spouse' embroidered upon it. Beneath the standard, two people faced each other in unrelenting combat; one was a girl dressed in red, the other a big fat fellow. Guo Jing saw right away that the girl, whose every movement was measured and controlled, had good kung fu, while the fat fellow was clearly not up to her level. After a few exchanges, the girl feigned lowering her guard, and the fat fellow advanced to attack with a blow 'Twin Dragons Leaving their Lair', projecting both fists towards the chest of his opponent. But the girl stepped back lightly; her left arm pivoted and struck the back of the fat fellow, who

tumbled to the ground. He got up, covered with dust and an embarrassed look on his face, before disappearing into the crowd. The spectators applauded and acclaimed the girl.

She rearranged a strand of hair and returned to the standard. Guo Jing regarded her more attentively; she was about eighteen years in age, very graceful and her face extremely pretty and lightly marked by life. Gusts of cold wind made the standard flutter. On either side of it an iron spear and two short halberds had been planted.

The girl exchanged some words in a low voice with a middle-aged man. He nodded, and stepped forward, clasped his hands and saluted the onlookers. "Your servant is named Mu Yi. I am from Shandong. Visiting your honorable city, I seek neither fame nor fortune. Because my girl is of the age to put a comb in her hair (after the age of fifteen years, the girls, now considered adults, can groom and hold their hair in place with a comb) and she has no fiancé. She made a vow and, though she does not desire a prosperous husband or a noble one, she will accept a valiant martial arts expert. That is the reason we have the audacity to propose a contest for her to find a husband. All young men, aged less than thirty years and who are unmarried, can match themselves against my girl. If he can vanquish her in a single move, I will give her to him in marriage. We've traversed the country from the south to the north, but all the renowned experts are already married, and the young brave ones doubtless did not dare to try...that is the reason we have not yet been able to find a good husband... Yanjing is a place where 'tigers and dragons hide in the shadows'. There are certainly many heroes and valiant men here. If my actions seem presumptuous, I beg your kind pardon!"

This Mu Yi looked sturdy and strong to Guo Jing, but his back was slightly hunched. He was white-haired and his

face wrinkled. He appeared melancholy and was clad in coarse fabric, patched in several places, while the girl was clothed in lively colors. After making his speech, Mu Yi listened for some time. He heard louts making vulgar comments, but they did not dare to enter the arena. He raised his eyes to the sky, saw leaden clouds gathering and the wind grew stronger.

"It appears that a blizzard threatens," he said in a low voice. "Ah, it was so dark, that day..." He turned back, took down the banner from the standard and prepared to stow it away. Two simultaneous shouts were heard from the east and west. "One moment!" and two men leaped into the open space.

Seeing them, the crowd burst out laughing. The one who had come from the east was obese and elderly. He had a large beard and had to be at least fifty years old. The one that come from the west was even more comical; he was a shaven-headed monk.

"What are you laughing at?" the fat one shouted to the crowd. "Isn't this a contest to find a spouse? I am not married, why can't I try my luck?"

"Venerable ancestor," the monk said, giggling, "Even if you win, you wouldn't want this girl, as beautiful as a flower, to become a widow right away!"

"And you," the fat one angrily said, "what are you here for?"

"If I can have such a pretty girl," the monk replied, "I'll return to the secular world!" The crowd was roaring again.

The girl frowned, apparently annoyed. She removed the cape which she used to cover herself and readied to continue the fight. Mu Yi held her arm, told her not to be irritated, and replanted the banner in the ground. The

monk and the obese person continued their bickering; each wanted to fight the girl first.

“Why don't you start by fighting against each other?” the spectators hilariously suggested. “The winner will have the honor of fighting the girl!”

“All right,” the monk said. “Old fellow, let's have a little fun!” He threw a blow with his fist; the obese one avoided it by lowering his head, before returning the blow.

Guo Jing recognized the style of the monk, the Arhat style from the Shaolin Temple. The obese one practiced the style of the ‘Five Movements’. Thus both were practitioners of external kung fu. The monk showed himself to be of great agility, whereas the obese one, in spite of his age, made use of heaviness and power. The monk stealthily struck three blows at the stomach of his adversary, who fought stoically, waiting to batter his right fist on the head of the monk. The blow succeeded and the monk fell to the ground, dazed; then he regained his senses, took a knife out of his robe and ran to the attack. The crowd let out a cry of surprise. The obese one leapt back before wielding an iron whip which had been rolled up around his waist. Both had come armed! The fight began again, still desperate, but more dangerous. The spectators applauded while moving back, fearing injury by straying blows.

Mu Yi approached the two men and said with a loud voice, “Stop! We are in the imperial capital, it is forbidden to display weapons! The two adversaries, carried away by their fight did not pay any attention to him. Mu Yi leapt forward suddenly, kicking away the knife of the monk while seizing the end of the whip. He pulled with force, and the obese one could not resist and released his whip. Mu Yi threw the whip onto the ground. The two adversaries, not daring to fight any longer, collected their weapons

shamefaced and disappeared enduring the jibes from the crowd.

Then the tinkling of small bells attached to the harnesses of horses was heard and a flamboyant company appeared. Several tens of vigorous servants accompanying a young nobleman had arrived. He looked at the brocade banner and examined the girl from head to toe. Then he smiled, got down from his horse and came forward. "Is this the girl who seeks a husband through a contest?" he asked. The girl blushed and turned her head without answering. Mu Yi advanced, clasped his fists and greeted him, "My name is Mu. What does the young Lord wish?"

"What are the rules of this contest?" Mu Yi explained them to him. "Then I want to try my chances as well..." He was a young and handsome nobleman of about eighteen or nineteen years old, dressed in a lavish brocade coat.

"At last a boy," thought Guo Jing, "who could make up a beautiful couple with this girl? Fortunately the monk and the old fat one a while ago were not up to par, if not... if not..."

"Your Lordship is joking," Mu Yi said, mortified.

"What do you mean?" the young man said.

"We are only wanderers without abode, how would we dare to measure ourselves against you? And it is not an ordinary contest, because it decides the marriage of my daughter ... Please forgive us."

"How long have you been holding this contest?" he asked.

"It has been more than six months that we have traveled the roads."

“That long and nobody could overcome your daughter?” the young nobleman said with disbelief.

“It is undoubtedly,” Mu Yi answered smiling, “because the experts in martial arts are all already married, or they won’t condescend to be measured against her.”

“OK, OK!” the young dandy exclaimed. “I will test ...”

“This is a young man with a refined and distinguished bearing,” Mu Yi thought. “If he came from an ordinary family, he would make a husband of choice for my child. But obviously, he belongs to the nobility. We are in the capital of the Jin and his family is perhaps well known at the Court. In any case, he is certainly rich and powerful. If my daughter wins, that could bring great trouble to us; if she loses, how could I marry her to such a person?”

“We are just wanderers in the realm of Rivers and Lakes [Jianghu],” he said, “We cannot measure ourselves with you. Please forgive us! We will leave!”

“This is an honorable contest,” the young nobleman said, laughing. “I assure you, I will not harm your daughter.” He then turned to the girl and said amiably, “It will be enough for the young lady to touch me to win, all right?”

“In a contest, it is necessary to comply strictly with the rules,” the girl protested.

“Hurry up with the fight!” a cry came from the crowd. “The speedier you fight, the more quickly you will be married, and the more quickly you will have babies!” The spectators burst out in laughter. The girl raised her eyebrows and removed her cape moodily. She greeted the young nobleman, who bowed in return.

"This young dandy grew up in affluence," Mu Yi thought, "Does he know martial arts? It is better to defeat him quickly and leave the city as soon as possible, in order to avoid trouble."

"All right," he said, "perhaps Your Lordship wishes to get rid of his coat."

"That is not necessary," the young dandy said, still smiling.

The spectators, who knew the abilities of the girl, thought that, for him to act that carelessly, he was going to suffer! But some of them thought that since the Mus have experience in the Jianghu realm, they certainly will not cause offense to the son of a noble family. They will probably make sure that he does not lose face.

"Do you believe," whispered some, "that they are really performing a 'Joust to Find a Spouse'? It's likely that old Mu only wants to benefit from the beauty and kung fu of his daughter to extract money from fools! This young dandy should watch his wallet!"

"Ready?" the girl said. The young nobleman swiveled toward the right, while his left sleeve flew with flashing speed towards the shoulder of the girl. She, surprised by the speed and skill of the attack, leaned and ducked, thus escaping the blow. But the actions of her adversary were stunning, and the right sleeve had already arrived near the head of the girl, endangering both sides. She had to leap back with the quickness of an arrow.

"Good!" the young nobleman shouted. Then he advanced without giving her the time to settle on her feet. The girl, still in the air, twisted and attacked to defend herself, kicking with her left foot in the direction of the young man's nose. He had to move back hastily, and both landed simultaneously on their feet. The young man had attacked



with three stances, and the girl had defended herself with agility; they both began to feel respect and watched each other closely. The girl blushed, and took the initiative. The battle started anew, but more desperate; it was performed so quickly that the young man looked like a shadow of shining brocade, whereas the girl resembled a red cloud.

Guo Jing was increasingly amazed: "These two young people are of my age," he said to himself, "and yet they possess such a high level of martial arts; it is really extraordinary! They would make a perfect pair. If they marry, they could, during their leisure hours, replay some of the 'Joust to Find a Spouse', and it would be fun!" With his mouth agape, he followed the spectacle with anticipation. Suddenly, the girl clutched the sleeve of her adversary and tore it off with force. She jumped back immediately, holding her trophy up.

"Young Lord," Mu Yi shouted, "We apologize!" Then he turned to his daughter. "Let us go now."

"Not so fast," the young man shouted with a grim look on his face. "Nothing is really decided yet!" He caught the two sides of his coat and pulled, causing the jade buttons to pop off. One of his servants helped him remove his coat, while another collected the buttons. Underneath, the young man wore a water green satin tunic, tightly held to his waist by a delicate green scarf, which gave him an even more captivating air. He raised his left palm and sent a blow, showing his true kung fu this time. An extremely violent gust of air passed very close to the girl.

Guo Jing, Mu Yi and his daughter were dumbfounded. "How could," they wondered, "a person of such distinction have such a cruel and brutal kung fu?"

The young nobleman was not looking for fun any longer; his blows were so powerful that his adversary could no longer approach him.

"We have a formidable expert here," Guo Jing thought, "The girl is no match for him. It appears that marriage is in sight. And I am quite content for them ... My six Shifus always said that there are legions of exceptional men in the Central Plains. Indeed, this young nobleman has an original palm style with sophisticated variations. Should we fight, I would probably not win against him!"

For his part, Mu Yi could also foretell the outcome of the duel. "My daughter," he shouted, "it is useless to continue. The young Lord is much stronger than you!"

"This young man has excellent kung fu," he said to himself, "thus he is not like one of those idle, gambling and whoring sons of certain families. I will ask for information about his family. If he is not related to the Jin government authorities, I will approve the marriage. My daughter's future will be secured ..." He shouted to both to stop their fight. But the battle was full blown and they did not stop.

"If I wanted to injure you now," the young man thought, "nothing would be easier; but I do not have the heart to do it." Suddenly, his left palm changed into a claw, and he clutched the wrist of the girl. Surprised, she sought to break loose. The young man pushed slightly forward and the girl lost her balance. As she was about to fall, the right arm of her adversary pulled her gently, and she fell into his arms. The spectators applauded and hollered with enthusiasm causing a great tumult.

Shame-faced and blushing, the girl begged in a low voice, "Release me, quickly!"

"Say 'my dear' to me," he answered, laughing, "and I'll release you!" Outraged by such impudence, she struggled, but he held her firmly and she could not break loose.

Mu Yi advanced and said, "You've won, please release my daughter!" The young nobleman burst into laughter but did not release her.

Losing patience, the girl directed a kick in the direction of the solar plexus of her adversary, trying to make him release her. He indeed released his right arm, parried the blow and caught the foot immediately; his qinna [grabbing and holding] technique was perfectly timed and he could seize anything he wanted. The girl panicked, and sought to release her foot by pulling with force. She at last succeeded, but in doing so she lost her small shoe which was embroidered with red flowers. She sat down on the ground, head lowered and flushed with shame, holding her foot covered by a white fabric sock. The young aristocrat smiled unsteadily, moved the embroidered shoe to his nose and sniffed it. In this situation, the hooligans were obviously not going to let this action pass without comment. "Bet that smells good!" they shouted in chorus. [Women's feet were considered erotic in ancient China, hence her embarrassment.]

"What is your name?" asked Mu Yi.

"It's not worth saying," laughed the young aristocrat. He put on his brocaded coat, cast a glance in direction of the girl, and placed the small embroidered shoe in his pocket. At that moment, the wind doubled in strength and large snowflakes began to fall.

"We live at the Inn of Prosperity," said Mu Yi, "in the western part of the city. Let us go there together, in order to make plans."

“To plan what?” the young aristocrat retorted. “It’s snowing now, it is necessary that I hurry home.”

Mu Yi turned pale. “You won this challenge, and I made a promise that I would give you my daughter in marriage. This is a serious business; one cannot treat it so lightly!”

The young aristocrat burst out laughing. “We had a little fun with martial arts,” he said, “it was rather interesting... as for the marriage, ha, I am obliged to decline that honor!”

Anger choked Mu Yi and prevented him from speaking, “You... You...”

“What do you take our young Prince for?” shouted a servant while laughing. “Do you believe that he would wed the daughter of vulgar traveling performers from Jianghu? Only in your dreams, old man, in your dreams”

Mu Yi was so angry that, with a blow, he struck the servant senseless. The young aristocrat did not seek any explanations. He had his servant carried away and was at the point of mounting his horse.

“You make fools of us!” Mu Yi shouted, clutching him by the left arm. “In any event, my daughter cannot marry such an insolent person as you. Please return the shoe to her!”

“It was her that gave it to me!” the young aristocrat said, laughing again, “Why do you make a nuisance of yourself? I won the tournament, I’ve declined your marriage, but I’ll keep the consolation prize!” He pivoted his arm, exerted some inner force and pulled away.

“It won’t happen like that!” Mu Yi exclaimed, trembling with anger. He leapt and struck with both fists, sending a blow called the ‘Bell and Drum Sound Together’, towards the temples of his adversary. The young man dodged, placed his

left foot in his stirrup and propelled himself from it into the arena.

"If I beat you, old man," he said, laughing, "then you won't try to force me to become your son-in-law any more?" The crowd, indignant at the impudent and arrogant attitude of the young man, remained quiet. Only some hooligans and good-for-nothings coarsely burst out laughing.

Without saying a word, Mu Yi tightened his belt, and attacked with the move 'Sea Swallow Skimming the Flood' at the young aristocrat. The young aristocrat knew that he was extremely angry and did not take the attack lightly. He dodged, replied with a blow to the belly, 'The Poisonous Snake Seeks its Den'. Mu Yi dodged, and struck with his left palm at his shoulder. The young man turned, advanced his right palm under Mu Yi's left arm. It was an extremely vicious blow, called 'Benefit from the Cloud to Change the Sun', executed without the knowledge of his adversary. However, Mu Yi parried effectively and clapped his two hands on the cheeks of the young aristocrat.

At that moment, no matter what move the aristocrat made, he could not avoid the blow! He frowned, bit his lips, and decided to employ another technique. His two hands flew like flashes and his ten fingers were planted in the back of the hands of Mu Yi. When he withdrew them, the ends of his fingers were smeared red! The spectators shouted in surprise. The girl, now in a panic, supported her father. She tore a strip from her tunic to wrap his hands, which bled profusely.

Mu Yi pushed his daughter back. "Move aside," he said. "This day, it's either him or me!"

The girl, pale faced, looked at the young aristocrat fixedly, and drew a dagger intending to plunge it into her own

heart. Surprised, Mu Yi sought to stop her hand, and the girl did not have time to pull the blade aside, which was planted in the hand of her father.

The spectators sighed. They deplored seeing a beautiful scene finishing in such a bloody way! Even the hooligans seemed indignant at such an outcome. The comments started to focus on the improper attitude of this young aristocrat.

Faced with such unrighteousness, Guo Jing could not remain standing by. He gently moved aside the people in front of him and advanced into the open space. "Ha!" he shouted, "to act like that, that's not good!"

Disconcerted for a moment, the young aristocrat laughingly retorted, "Ah, not good? Just why is it necessary to act well?" The young aristocrat's servants, noticing that Guo Jing was dressed like a peasant and that he spoke with a marked southern accent, made fun of him.

Guo Jing did not understand the mockery, and said seriously, "You should marry this young lady!"

"And if I don't marry her?"

"If you didn't want to marry her, why did you come down to fight? It was well marked, on the banner, 'Joust to Find a Spouse'!"

"Kid, why are you interfering?" the young aristocrat retorted, in a threatening voice.

"This young lady is not only very beautiful, but she has excellent kung fu. Why don't you want her? Didn't you see that she felt so offended that she wanted to commit suicide?"

"You're such a moron that it isn't worthwhile explaining it to you..." The young aristocrat turned on his heels to leave.

Guo Jing restrained him. "Huh! How can you leave like that?"

"What do you want?"

"Didn't I tell you to marry this young lady?" The aristocrat laughed and again was about to leave.

Mu Yi, seeing Guo Jing's intervention, understood that he was affronted but naive and little acquainted with the ways of the world. He approached and said to him, "Little brother, don't worry about him. So long as I have the breath of life, I will avenge this insult." Then he shouted at the young aristocrat, "At least leave your name!"

"I told you I can't call you 'father-in-law'," he retorted insolently, "why do you still want to know my name?"

Very annoyed by this, Guo Jing leapt forward while shouting, "Then return that embroidered shoe to the young lady!"

"Is this any of your damn business!" the nobleman said furiously. "You've taken a fancy to this young miss yourself, haven't you?"

Guo Jing shook his head and said, "No! Are you going to return it, or not?" The young aristocrat stiffened his hand suddenly and slapped Guo Jing heavily. Guo Jing moved instantly, and employed a qinna technique, seizing the wrists of his adversary by crossing his hands.

He sought to escape, in vain. "Do you want to die?" he shouted, surprised and annoyed, while aiming a kick towards Guo Jing's lower abdomen.

He flexed his muscles and pushed the young aristocrat back towards the open space. Obviously, this person had a good lightness technique [Qinggong], for, instead of falling on his back, he kept his balance and landed on his feet. He nimbly removed his brocaded coat and exclaimed, "Don't you want to continue living, little fool? If you've got guts, come and test yourself against me!"

"Why would I fight with you?" Guo Jing said, shaking his head. "Since you do not want to marry the young lady, return her embroidered shoe!"

The spectators, seeing the intervention of Guo Jing, wanted to see what he was capable of and didn't think that he would retreat. Some hooligans even hooted, "Talk without action, it's unworthy of a hero!"

For his part, the young aristocrat, having been caught by Guo Jing, realized that his kung fu wasn't insignificant and especially noted that he had powerful internal energy. He was happy not to fight; but, of course, he couldn't return the embroidered shoe without losing face! He therefore gathered his coat and laughing, turned on his heels.

Guo Jing caught him by the side of the coat and repeated, "How can you just leave?"

The young aristocrat had a sudden idea. He cast his coat over the head of his opponent and struck two fists into his chest. Wrapped up in the coat, Guo Jing could not avoid the impacts. Fortunately, he had practiced two years of orthodox neigong with Ma Yu, so that these blows, although extremely painful, could not truly injure him. Goaded by anger, he successively launched nine fast kicks while alternating stances; it was a skill technique developed by Han Baoju, which had already enabled him to beat other enemies. Even if the disciple did not yet have the skill of the



master, and even if the kicks were made while he was blinded, they disturbed the young aristocrat, who could avoid the first seven, but was caught by the last two fully on his chest.

The two young men simultaneously leapt back. Guo Jing, still amazed, got rid of the coat that hampered him. He could not believe such treachery on behalf of his adversary. "He knew full well," he thought, "that he'd entered a 'Joust to Find a Spouse'. He won, and yet refused to marry the young lady! Moreover, when I tried to reason with him, not only was it he who struck first, but he used a shameful trick! If I hadn't practiced neigong, he would have broken my ribs and crushed my internal organs!" Being of a simple and open nature, and since he had always lived with decent people, he did not know anything about the perfidy of human nature. Even though, during the past years, his Masters had not failed to warn him about tricks and treacheries which one might meet in Jianghu, he'd listened to them the way one listens to stories and they did not remain in his memory long since they had not been experienced. At that moment, he was furious and perplexed, not able to believe in the existence of such low methods.

The young aristocrat, angered by the two kicks he had received, advanced on Guo Jing with his fist raised. Guo Jing defended, but could not avoid the rain of blows which fell on him and he fell down. The servants were laughing. Their Master puffed out his chest and said while laughing, "So you think you can play the deliverer of justice with your three-legged cat technique? Go back home and tell your Shimu [this is a put-down of his Shifus since it means 'the wife of a teacher'] to give you lessons for twenty more years!"

Guo Jing got up, breathed in deeply, circulated his chi in his whole body so that the pain diminished. "My Shifu doesn't have a wife," he retorted.

"Then tell him to marry one quickly!"

Guo Jing was going to answer, "I have six Shifus, and one of them is a woman..." but did not have time. He saw that the other was going to leave, so he advanced on him, fist raised, and shouted, "Prepare yourself!"

The young aristocrat dodged, Guo Jing swung a left hook right at his face which the other blocked. They stood, their arms holding onto their adversary's, each one trying to use internal energy to overcome the other. Guo Jing was a little stronger but his opponent had better techniques and it was difficult to decide between them.

Guo Jing breathed in deeply to concentrate his internal energy, while the other suddenly loosened his pressure. Guo Jing fell forward. As he tried to regain his balance, he felt a stroke coming from behind. He hastened to avoid it but, not having regained full balance, he stumbled. While falling, he supported himself on his elbow, rebounded and, while spinning in the air, delivered a kick with his left foot. Watching this fast and spectacular recovery, the crowd applauded.

The young aristocrat moved away and attacked with two palms, one was a feint to confuse his adversary, while the other was the real stroke. Guo Jing then used the technique 'Disconnect the Muscles and Separate the Bones'; his hands fluttered in all directions, aiming at all the tendons and joints of the body. Seeing the violence of this attack, the aristocrat suddenly changed tactics; he began to use the same technique! There was a difference however; the one learned by Guo Jing had been invented by Zhu Cong, the

'Magical Hands Scholar'. It diverged from the orthodox technique taught by the masters of the central Plains considerably. The two looked similar in their principles, but had some differences in execution. One extended his index and middle fingers trying to seize the opponent's 'Supporting the Old' [Yang Lao] accupoint behind the wrist; the other tried to hook and seize the opponent's knuckles. The two felt mutual apprehension and didn't dare to commit completely, barely sketching a movement before changing to another. After forty or so exchanges, they still couldn't tell who had the upper hand.

Snow continued to fall and a fine white layer covered the heads and the shoulders of the spectators that surrounded them. Suddenly, the young aristocrat seemed to leave an opening on his chest. Guo Jing saw it immediately and tried to benefit from it by pointing his index finger at the point 'Tail of Turtledove' on his adversary. But he had some reservations about using this action. "There is no hate between us," he said to himself, "I can't use such a deadly stroke on him!" He then diverted his finger and touched another point which had no effect on his adversary. The young aristocrat had enough time to catch his wrist and pull him, while hooking him with his foot. Guo Jing lost his balance and fell once again.

Mu Yi, whose hand had just been bandaged by his daughter, also watched the two. He saw Guo Jing fall for the third time and understood that he was not experienced enough to face the insolent youngster and he hastened to lift him from the ground. "Little brother," he said, "let it go. There's no point in staying among scoundrels of this kind any longer!"

Guo Jing had seen stars and was hurt, but he felt rage mounting in his head. He moved away from Mu Yi and rushed at his adversary, while increasing the number of strokes. The young aristocrat, surprised to see him insist on

continuing in spite of the beating that he had received, moved back three steps. "Don't you admit your defeat?" Guo Jing didn't answer and continued to attack.

"If you don't stop," the young aristocrat threatened, "I am going to be obliged to kill you!"

"If you don't return the shoe," Guo Jing retorted, "I will never be finished with you!"

"But this girl is not even your sister, why do you persist in wanting to be my brother-in-law?"

"To be the brother-in-law of someone," constituted an insult in the Jin capital, and the scoundrels in the crowd exploded with laughter when they heard it. Guo Jing didn't understand any of it.

"I don't even know her," he said, "and she isn't my sister!"

The young aristocrat no longer knew whether to laugh or to be angry! He ended up saying, "Then protect yourself you stupid fool!"

The two young people continued to fight. This time, Guo Jing was more prudent and didn't fall into the repeated traps that his adversary prepared for him. In fact, from a strictly technical viewpoint, the kung fu of the young aristocrat was superior, but Guo Jing never gave up and fought like a barbarian. Even after he received blows, he continued to attack with persistence and without retreating. He had fought like this when he was small, during the fights with the kids of Dukhsh's gang. Even though he had acquired more agility while learning martial arts, his way of fighting hadn't fundamentally changed and it was in his nature to fight with savagery. He had forgotten the recommendation of his Fourth Shifu. 'If you can't defeat the enemy, flee!' In his mind, the more important formula

had always been, 'If the enemy is unbeatable, persist!', except that he didn't realize it!

The spectacle attracted more and more spectators and the area was completely filled. The wind and snow had increased in intensity, but no one left.

Mu Yi, with much experience in the Jianghu region, well knew that, if the fight continued, the crowds were going to attract the attention of the authorities and maybe provoke their intervention. He knew that it would be better to not expose themselves to that possibility! But, this young man had generously come to help them; he could not leave him here alone. He felt very anxious. He raised his eyes and was vaguely viewing the assembly, when he noticed in the crowd, several individuals who seemed to belong to the martial world. He had been so focused on the fight that he had not even noticed their arrival.

He then moved slowly, approaching the servants of the young aristocrat who were standing in a group. Watching them out of the corner of his eye, he saw, among them, three characters with a martial look. The first wore a scarlet Buddhist monk's dress and a golden cap; it was a very tall Tibetan lama. The second, medium-sized, had silvery white hair and a ruddy, beaming face with smooth skin like a baby, without one wrinkle. He was clothed in a long robe, but one couldn't tell if it was Taoist or Buddhist. The third was very small, but his blood-shot eyes had a piercing look, and he wore a proud small mustache.

The presence of these unusual faces astonished Mu Yi. He then heard one of the servants say, "Supreme Virtue, have the goodness to rid us of this stupid fool, please! If this continues and something serious happens to the young Prince, we servants could face death!"

Hearing this, Mu Yi was shaken. "So," he thought, "this young scoundrel is a prince! If the fight continues, misfortune might happen to him. Apparently all these experts are part of the royal house and the servants have summoned them here to lend assistance to the prince."

The Tibetan llama smiled without saying a word. The old man shouted while laughing, "The 'Supreme Virtue' Lingzhi is an eminent member of a secret school in Tibet, he cannot stoop so low as to exchange stances with a lowly skilled fighter of this kind, it would be too demeaning... If something should happen, the Prince would at most break your legs; he wouldn't go so far as to kill you, would he?"

"Anyway," intervened the small man with the blood-shot eyes, "the young Prince is stronger than this kid, what do you have to fear?" He was small, but also had a piercing voice. The spectators around them jumped when they heard it and turned around to look at him. Made nervous by his menacing look, they lowered their eyes immediately.

"Our young Prince did put in a lot of hard work to learn this kung fu," the silvery haired old man said, "if he can't give a public demonstration of it, he would really be frustrated if all these years of effort remains unseen! If someone actually helps him, he will surely be vexed..."

"Venerable Liang," the small man said, "to what school does the palm technique of the young Prince belong?"

"Brother Peng," the old man answered, laughing, "Do you want to put me to the test? The young Prince has a palm technique combining agility with complexity that is indeed difficult to acquire. If I am not mistaken, he has learned his kung fu from a Taoist of the Quanzhen Sect!"

Mu Yi was again startled. "Could this inconsiderate youngster be a disciple of the Quanzhen Sect?"

"The Venerable Liang has a remarkable eye," the small man said. "You've spent your life at the foot of the Mountain of Eternal Whiteness and you've dedicated yourself to meditation and to alchemical practices. People say that you rarely come into the Central Plains, and yet you seem to know by heart the styles of the Chinese schools. I admire you greatly."

"Brother Peng is too generous with his praise," the old man said, while smiling.

"But," the small man pursued, "the Taoists of the Quanzhen Sect are of bizarre and surprising character. How could they accept the young Prince as a disciple? That would be rather astonishing."

"If the Sixth Prince wants to, who can he not entice to join him? Just like you Brother Peng, you are a great hero who dominates Shandong and Shanxi, yet you are now part of the Prince's household."

The small man acknowledged this. Their attention was again focused on the fight. They noticed that Guo Jing had changed styles again; the rhythm of his palm technique slowed, and his defense was extremely tight. The young Prince had repeatedly searched for ways to attack but had been repulsed by very heavy strokes.

"In your opinion," the old man asked the small man, "where does this young boy's kung fu come from?"

"His kung fu is very mixed," he answered after a moment of hesitation. "One would say that he had several Shifus..."

"Chief Peng is right," interrupted someone nearby. "This kid is the disciple of the 'Seven Freaks of Jiangnan'."

Mu Yi examined the person who had just spoken. It was a skinny man with a dark face and three lumps on his forehead. "He called him Chief Peng; would this small man be the bandit Peng Lianhu, the 'Butcher of One Thousand Hands', who slaughters without frowning! As for the 'Seven Freaks of Jiangnan', it has been a long time since I heard their name mentioned, could they still be part of this world?"

At this time, the skinny man with the dark face suddenly roared, "Little brat, I finally found you." He drew a steel trident, rolled up his sleeves and bounded into the arena. Hearing the noise behind him, Guo Jing turned around and was nose to nose with the man with the three lumps on his forehead; it was the Three-Headed Dragon, Hou Tonghai, the martial uncle of the 'Four Demons of the Yellow River'. Surprised and worried, he hesitated, not knowing what to do. The young Prince took advantage of this hesitation to hit him on the shoulder bringing Guo Jing back to the fight.

Seeing Hou Tonghai bound into the arena, weapon in hand, the spectators believed that he was going to help one of the fighters and, finding this unworthy, began to hoot. Mu Yi, who now knew that he was also part of the royal household, moved forward, ready to fight him if he tried something against Guo Jing. He remained conscious of the fact that the enemy was superior in numbers. However, Hou Tonghai was not angry at Guo Jing. He sped along to the other side and into the crowd where a puny young boy in rags jumped up after seeing him and turned tail. The 'Three-Headed Dragon' rushed after him, followed by four men.

Out of the corner of his eye, Guo Jing realized that it was Huang Rong, the new friend that he had gotten acquainted with in Kalgan. Hou Tonghai pursued him with his weapon in hand, followed by the 'Four Demons of the Yellow River'. Very worried, he threw a kick and jumped backward. "A



moment please!" he exclaimed. "I need to stop for one moment; we will continue our fight later."

The Young Prince, tired of this fight, had lost all desire to continue. This request could not have come at a better time. "If you admit your defeat," he sneered, "you can go..."

Preoccupied with his friend's safety, Guo Jing got ready to lend him assistance when he heard the sound of footsteps; it was Huang Rong who had come back dragging a worn-out old shoe and laughing. Hou Tonghai pursued and called him names and tried to hit him on the back with his trident. But Huang Rong was extraordinarily agile and the trident always missed its target by a small margin. The young boy adroitly slipped through the crowd and had already come out again on the other side. When Hou Tonghai came nearer, one could see the black marks of two palms on his cheeks; obviously, the fragile boy had managed to slap him twice. Hou Tonghai pushed aside everyone in his way and managed to find a path through the crowd, but Huang Rong was already far away. Hou Tonghai stopped and made gestures to show Huang Rong what he had in mind. "If I don't succeed in catching and slicing you up," Hou Tonghai howled, insane with rage, "I don't want to be called a man any longer!"

Huang Rong waited until Hou Tonghai came nearer before fleeing again. Everyone burst out laughing. In the meantime, three breathless men arrived, they were three of the 'Four Demons of the Yellow River'; the one missing was Qian Qingjian, known as 'Axe Buries Family'.

Seeing such a spectacle, Guo Jing was surprised and pleased at the same time. He thought, "This friend of mine must have excellent kung fu. The other day, in the Black Pine Woods, it must have been him who lured Hou Tonghai away and hung the 'Four Demons of the Yellow River' from

the trees!" The surprise was not less in the opposition camp.

'Supreme Virtue Lingzhi' asked: "Ginseng Immortal, that little beggar has remarkable agility, to which school does he belong? Apparently, Brother Hou has lost this skirmish..."

The white-haired Master of the Mountain of Eternal Whiteness was called Liang Ziwing. Since his youth he had consumed natural ginseng and other herbs which had protected him from the advance of old age. He didn't recognize the kung fu style of the little beggar and shook his head. Then, after a moment, he said, "When I am outside the Pass (the border crossing between China proper and the lands to the north), I've often heard claims that the 'Dragon King of the Demonic Group' was a frightening expert; who would have thought that his martial brother was such a pitiful figure, even to the point of not being able to handle a mere child?"

The small man was Peng Lianhu. He frowned without answering. He was a great friend of the 'Dragon King of the Demonic Group', with whom he often collaborated and assisted in robbing raids. He knew the kung fu of Hou Tonghai, which was not bad, but couldn't explain how he could be toyed with that easily.

The diversion with Huang Rong and Hou Tonghai had stopped the duel between Guo Jing and the young Prince. The latter clearly had the edge on Guo Jing, since he'd succeeded in making his adversary fall several times; but he himself had received a multitude of blows and felt tired out. He wiped off the sweat which ran down his face with the scarf he wore as a belt.

Mu Yi, who had stowed the brocade banner, held Guo Jing's hand, thanking him warmly and urging him to leave this

place. Suddenly, the pitter-patter of feet was heard as Huang Rong and Hou Tonghai returned, one chasing the other. The former held two pieces of fabric, two pieces which matched pieces missing from the tunic of the latter; the torn tunic exposed a hairy chest. A little later, Wu Qinglie and Ma Qingxiong appeared, weapons in hand, faithfully and breathless following. Missing was Shen Qinggang, whom Huang Rong apparently managed to dispose of in some mysterious way. The commotion provoked more laughter and jibes from the audience.

Shouts came from the west as several tens of soldiers, wicker rods in their hands, shouted and struck the onlookers to open the way for a large red and golden sedan chair carried by six well muscled men. "It is the Princess," exclaimed the servants of the young Prince.

"Which idiot had the insolence to inform my mother?" the latter thundered, frowning. The servants, who did not dare to answer, hastened to approach the sedan chair which halted at an emptied spot.

"Why are you fighting?" a soft female voice was heard from inside. "It's snowing and you don't have your coat on, you will certainly catch a cold ..."

Hearing that voice from a distance, Mu Yi seemed as if struck by lightning. "How is this possible?" he thought, dumbfounded. "That voice resembles hers so much! But that's impossible, she is a Jin princess ... Perhaps I've thought too much about my wife and I've become crazy ..." Despite everything, he could not stop himself from edging nearer to the sedan chair. He saw a dainty hand with a handkerchief appear from inside the sedan chair and tenderly wipe the sweat from the face of the young nobleman, who listened to the words pronounced in a low voice, undoubtedly of reproach and admonition ... "But

mom," the young Prince said, "I was just having fun, all is well ..."

"Put your coat on quickly," the Princess said, "and let us go home ..."

"How could two voices be that similar?" Mu Yi, still astonished, saw the white hand disappearing behind a silk curtain on which peonies were embroidered in gold wire. He tried to peer in but couldn't see through the bright curtain.

One of the servants collected the brocade coat of his Master and yelled at Guo Jing, "Animal! Look at the state this coat is in and you're the cause!" One of the soldiers that came with the Princess raised his wicker rod and violently slashed down at Guo Jing's head. Guo Jing dodged, seized the wrist of his attacker, took the rod away, and tripped him. The man fell on the ground and Guo Jing whipped him with the rod. "You dare to strike wrongly and viciously?" he shouted. The crowd, some of whom had received blows from the rod, applauded in appreciation. The other soldiers shouted and hastened to the rescue of their companion, but Guo Jing took them by pairs and tossed them away.

"Still showing off?" the young Prince shouted. He leapt at Guo Jing and both exchanged blows again. The Princess shouted for him to stop, but the son did not seem to fear his mother, "Look at me, mom," he exclaimed. "This bloody peasant is doing wicked things in the capital! If he is not taught a good lesson, he won't respect his old man!" He wanted to give his best performance and he doubled his efforts. Guo Jing, not being able to parry his nimble and fast palms, was struck by several blows and stumbled twice.

Mu Yi, for his part, was still hypnotized by the sedan chair. A corner of the curtain had been opened; he saw two caring

eyes, some hair strands and part of the face of a mother, full of tenderness and worry for her son. Mu Yi remained frozen.

Guo Jing's moves had changed for the better but he was confronted with an adversary with renewed vigour. The young Prince sought to deliver mortal blows, hoping to injure his adversary seriously, in order to put a definite end to the combat. But Guo Jing had a thick skin and a good neigong basis so he was able to endure many blows. Moreover, the techniques of the prince lacked sophistication; his power was limited because of his youth and lack of experience. He tried on several occasions to grab Guo Jing with ten fingers forming claws, using the technique which had enabled him to injure Mu Yi, but the disciple of the Six Freaks defended himself using the technique 'Disconnect the Muscles and Separate the Bones'. As the brawl reached its climax, one could again see Huang Rong and Hou Tonghai running after each other. This time, the latter had a long straw in his hair. Usually this is a sign indicating an item is on sale. A bit of straw on his head thus meant that the head was to be sold. It was obviously Huang Rong's doing, of which Hou Tonghai was not yet aware because he was so occupied with the chase! The remaining two 'Demons of the Yellow River' had also disappeared, obviously disposed of in some way ...

Liang Ziwong and his companions racked their brains over the identity of Huang Rong. They watched Hou Tonghai running swiftly, but he never managed to catch up with the boy in rags. "Could this kid be a member of the Beggar Clan?" Peng Lianhu asked suddenly. The Beggar Clan was at this time the most powerful secret society in the realm of Jianghu (Rivers and Lakes region). Liang Ziwong twitched, but didn't answer.

The two young people attacked each other more swiftly and with increasing strength. Occasionally Guo Jing received a palm blow on his shoulder and sometimes the prince got a kick on his thigh. They fought body against body, raging and panting. Even an amateur could see that the fight was becoming increasingly dangerous; the least distraction could cause a fatal injury. Peng Lianhu and Liang Ziwong prepared their hidden projectiles covertly, in order to intervene when necessary. Although Guo Jing was a very obstinate person, his kung fu was not yet a match for the young prince. The two experts persuaded themselves that they would be able to take control of the situation in time to prevent a disaster.

Guo Jing's type of development was difficult to reproduce. Having grown up on the steppe, he had undergone all the rigors of life there and had experienced and was hardened by numerous battles. The Prince, on the other hand, had always lived in luxury; it was no wonder, that in this utterly brutal and merciless endurance battle, he began stumbling as he began to suffer from fatigue. Guo Jing suddenly uttered a great cry, seized his adversary by the collar, raised him high and violently threw him to the ground. It was neither the technique 'Disconnect the Muscles and Separate the Bones' nor qinna [the art of seize and control], but a unique Mongolian wrestling technique that Jebe, his archery teacher, had taught him.

The Prince reacted promptly by jumping up as soon as he touched the ground and seized Guo Jing's legs so that they both fell. He got up quickly, tore a long lance from the hands of a soldier and thrust it towards Guo Jing's stomach. Guo Jing rolled to the side, while the other continued handling the long lance with dexterity. Guo Jing tried to grab the lance with the stance 'To Seize the Blade', but in vain!

"My son," the Princess exclaimed, "do not injure him! Be satisfied with winning!" However, the Prince, who seemed really eager to pin Guo Jing down with the lance, turned a deaf ear.

Guo Jing, seeing the gleaming tip of the lance a few inches from his nose, parried with his arm, and something collapsed behind him. He seized Mu Yi's brocade banner. Using the stance 'Drawing Aside the Clouds to Peer at the Sun', he used the pole like a long staff to counter the circling lance.

With both fighters armed now, Guo Jing employed the techniques of the 'Exorcizing Staff' taught by his First Shifu. In spite of the length of the pole, which obstructed him a little, he could deploy all subtleties of this art methodically developed by Ke Zhen' E to counter Mei Chaofeng. Each movement used variants, often unexpected, but always effective. Surprised by the ability of that weapon, the Prince was forced to defend. But his dexterity with the lance was still impressive.

As Mu Yi watched the Prince handling that weapon, he was astonished; all his stances corresponded with the spear style of the Yang family. This technique, which was only handed down from father to son, was rarely seen even in the South. He was really dumbfounded seeing it now in the capital of the Jin. In spite of his nimble movements, this version of the lance style did not seem completely orthodox; it appeared devoid of its essence as if it had been copied without the knowledge of its rightful owner. The watchers saw the crossing and swaying of the lance and the banner pole, scattering the snowflakes in all directions.

The Princess, seeing her son almost sweating blood, could not contain her anxiety any longer, "Stop!" she exclaimed. "Stop fighting both of you!"

Hearing these words, Peng Lianhu advanced with large steps into the arena and he struck the banner pole brutally. Guo Jing felt a sharp pain in his hands and released the pole, which flew away. The brocade banner spread in the wind and one could read, through the falling snowflakes, the golden letters: 'Joust to Find a Spouse'. Very surprised, Guo Jing did not even have time to see the face or the silhouette of his adversary as he felt the coming blow. He leapt back, but was too slow; the palm of Peng Lianhu had already touched his arm and he lost balance and fell to the ground.

"Young Prince," Peng Lianhu said, laughing, "I will get rid of this thoughtless young man, so that he can not intrude any longer ..." He raised his palm, inhaled deeply, and sent a brutal blow at Guo Jing's head. Guo Jing, who was on the ground, knew that he did not stand a chance, but regardless, he raised his arms to parry the blow. 'Supreme Virtue' Lingzhi and the 'Ginseng Immortal' exchanged glances; the arms of the young man would be lost, the blow of the 'Butcher of One Thousand Hands' was violent and was obviously going to smash them.

At this critical moment, a shout came from the crowd, "Hold on!" A gray silhouette holding a strange weapon leapt forward and wrapped up the right wrist of Peng Lianhu. Peng Lianhu withdrew with force, cracking and breaking the weapon, then attacked with his left palm immediately. The man avoided the blow by lowering his head, while seizing Guo Jing by the waist and carrying him away. The spectators saw a middle-aged Taoist, dressed in gray, who had been holding a fly-whisk in his hand, of which only the handle remained. The torn-off strands of the fly-whisk were still around Peng Lianhu's wrist. They looked at each other; although they had exchanged only one stance, they'd been able to fathom each others kung fu.



"You are undoubtedly the famed Master Peng?" the Taoist said. "It is a great honor to meet you here today."

"You are overly courteous. May I ask the name of Master Taoist?"

The Taoist, on which all eyes were fixed, did not answer. He stepped forward with his left foot and then withdrew it. One could see on the ground, covered with a very fine layer of snow, a ten inch deep hole! The simple pressure of his foot had dug such a deep hole, revealing extraordinary kung fu.

Peng Lianhu was startled and said, "Are you the 'Immortal with the Iron Foot', Jade Sun Wang?"

"Now Master Peng is over praising," the Taoist answered. "I am indeed Wang Chuyi, but I am not worthy of the title 'Immortal'."

Peng Lianhu, Liang Ziwing and 'Supreme Virtue' Lingzhi knew very well that Wang Chuyi was an eminent member of the Quanzhen [Absolute Perfection] Sect; his fame was only slightly less than that of 'Eternal Spring', Qiu Chuji. They had only heard of, but never seen him. They examined him attentively. He was a man with fine features and a little goatee on his chin. He wore immaculate white socks, gray shoes, and seemed to take much care to his clothing. If he had not demonstrated his kung fu, nobody there would believe that he was indeed the 'Immortal with the Iron Foot', who, by keeping one foot on a cliff's edge and swaying like a "lotus leaf in the wind", had much impressed the brave men of Hebei and Shandong.

Wang Chuyi smiled and said, pointing at Guo Jing, "I don't know this young friend at all, but seeing him intervening with such bravery and courage, I was full of admiration. That is why I permit myself to beg Master Peng to let him live."

"The request was made with such courtesy," said Peng Lianhu, "and when an eminent Quanzhen master intervenes, who wouldn't grant him a request?"

"Very well," Wang Chuyi answered, cupping his hands, "thank you ....."

After thanking Peng, he asked Guo Jing his name. Then Wang Chuyi turned and his expression changed; his face darkened and he asked the young Prince sternly, "What is your name? Who is your Shifu?"

The young Prince, after having heard the name of Wang Chuyi, felt ill and would have liked to disappear unnoticed. However, the Taoist had kept an eye on him, "My name is Wanyan Kang," he answered, "I cannot reveal the name of my Shifu."

"Your Shifu has a red mole on his left cheek, hasn't he?" Wanyan Kang wanted to divert the question with a witty remark, but the terrible glance of the Taoist frightened him; he suppressed what he intended to say, and nodded. "I suspected it," Wang Chuyi said, "You are the disciple of Brother Qiu. What did your Shifu tell you before teaching you martial arts?"

Wanyan Kang understood the situation had become very untenable for him. He thought, "If Shifu hears of what has happened today, it will be a catastrophe!"

"If Master Taoist knows my Shifu," he said in a servile manner, "you deserve my complete respect. Why don't you come to my modest residence, so that I can benefit from your advice?" Before Wang Chuyi could answer, the prince turned to Guo Jing and said while bowing, "After exchanging blows, a friendship may grow," he said smiling. "I admire the kung fu of Brother Guo very much. I invite

you both to come to my house in order for us to get to know each other better."

"And what will happen about the marriage?" Guo Jing asked, pointing at Mu Yi and his daughter.

Wanyan Kang seemed embarrassed. "This matter deserves further pondering ..."

"My friend," Mu Yi said, after approaching and drawing Guo Jing by his sleeve, "let us go, we don't need to occupy him any longer."

Wanyan Kang bowed again to Wang Chuyi. "Master Taoist, I will await you at home; you only have to ask for the residence of Prince Zhao. The weather is very cold, all things are freezing. It is an ideal time to sit together by a fire and admire the snow. We shall drink to celebrate this meeting." He climbed on the horse, whose bridle his servant held, and galloped off into the crowd without any concern about trampling somebody. This contemptuous behavior triggered Wang Chuyi's anger, "My little friend," he said to Guo Jing, "come with me."

"I must wait for a very dear friend," Guo Jing said. As he said these words, he saw Huang Rong jumping up in the middle of the crowd and shouting to him, "Don't worry about me, I'll find you in no time at all!" Huang Rong turned and his diminutive figure soon disappeared into the crowd. Hou Tonghai, the 'Three Headed Dragon', gave chase. Guo Jing turned and kowtowed in the snow, to thank Wang Chuyi for saving his life. The Taoist raised him and took his arm. Both found a path through the crowd and ran in the direction of the outskirts of the city.

## **Chapter 8 - Each One Demonstrating His Skill**

**Translated by Patudo, Dugu Seeking a Win and SunnySnow**



*The water splashed and a flat boat floated out from among a cluster of trees. He saw on the stern of the boat a woman paddling. Her long hair was draped on her shoulder and she was dressed in white from head to toe, with a golden hair band on top of her head; the white snow reflected its resplendent brightness.*

Wang Chuyi went extremely quickly. In little time, they'd left the city. Some li further, they arrived at the foot of a hill. Eager to test the abilities of Guo Jing, the Taoist did not slow and ran more and more quickly.

At the time Ma Yu taught Guo Jing how to control his breathing; he had climbed and descended a high mountain cliff many times. Today, even after a heated battle, this race did not intimidate him. Running against the wind as heavy snow fell, Wang Chuyi sprang up a small hill with its slope covered with slippery snow. Near the top, the slope became increasingly steep, but Guo Jing's progress made him wonder. He advanced without breathing hard, as if his pulse had not accelerated and as if the ground were flat. The Taoist, extremely surprised, released Guo Jing's arm, "Your kung fu foundation is rather well established! How is it possible that you were not able to beat him?" Guo Jing had no answer and could only remain silent. "Who is your Shifu?" Wang continued.

Guo Jing knew of the Taoist, since, at the top of cliff, he had received instructions to play the part of Yin Zhiping, to mislead Mei Chaofeng. He remembered that Wang Chuyi was one of the martial brothers of Ma Yu and he did not hesitate to tell the truth. He quickly told of how he had been taught by the 'Seven Freaks of Jiangnan' and also by Ma Yu.

"My senior brother gave you lessons!" Wang exclaimed, delighted. "He is formidable, so I see no reason why I

should worry about you!" Guo Jing's eyes widened as he looked at him without understanding.

"This so-called Young Prince, Wanyan Kang," Wang explained, "is the disciple of my martial brother Qiu Chuji. Did you know?"

"Ah," Guo Jing was astonished. "I was unaware of it..." Indeed, Ma Yu had taught to him some basics for the control of internal energy, as well as the qinggong technique called 'Flight of the Golden Eagle', to enable him to climb the cliff. But he had not given him the least instruction in battle techniques or weapons skills. This is why Guo Jing did not know any Quanzhen kung fu. Hearing the remarks of Wang Chuyi, he remembered his battle with the young Taoist Yin Zhiping, whose movements seemed to come from the same style as those of Wanyan Kang. He believed that he had done wrong and bowed his head. "I did not know," he said humbly, "that this Young Prince was a disciple of Master Qiu. I behaved out of order with him; please do not hold it against him..."

Wang Chuyi burst out laughing. "Your righteousness and gentlemanly spirit appeal to me. How could I reproach you? The rules of our Sect are extremely strict. If a disciple is at fault, he will be punished accordingly and justice will be done. This young boy was impudent and arrogant; I will ask Brother Qiu to punish him severely."

"If he agrees to marry the young lady, Mu," Guo Jing pleaded, "please agree to forgive him..."

Wang Chuyi shook his head without answering. He could see that Guo Jing had a good heart and that he forgave readily; he looked on him with even more sympathy. "Brother Qiu has always hated evildoers, and especially the Jin," he thought. "How did it come about that he agreed to

take on a Jin prince as his disciple? Even more strange is that the knowledge he seems to have of our kung fu appears rather thorough. That would mean that Brother Qiu devoted much time and energy on him! However, in his kung fu, one senses the pernicious influences of unorthodox and perverse schools. I'm totally mystified!"

"Brother Qiu told me he was coming to Yanjing," he said to Guo Jing. "He should arrive in the next few days. We will ask him for an explanation when we see him. I intended to mention that he took a disciple by the name of Yang, who must contest himself against you in Jiaying. I do not know how powerful this boy is but don't be concerned, I will be there and I'm sure you will come out on top."

Guo Jing was obeying the order given by his six Masters, to go, at the fifteenth day of the eighth lunar month, to the prefecture of Jiaying. But they had not explained to him for what reason. "Master Taoist," he then asked, "why must I test myself against him?"

"If your teachers did not think it needful to explain it to you," Wang answered, "it would be wrong for me to do it in their place." He had learned, from Qiu Chuji, the origin and outcome of this business and he felt, for the generous sacrifice made by the Six Freaks, immense admiration. He'd had the same thoughts as Ma Yu and hoped for the victory of the Six. However, as his junior, he could not ask Qiu to back down. Today, encouraged by the personality of Guo Jing, he wondered how he could help him secretly, without damaging the reputation of his martial brother. Then he decided to go to Jiaying, and to think, on the spot, of some way to aid him. "Let's go back and visit Mu Yi," the Taoist proposed. "His daughter seems to be rather stubborn and I fear this will cause him problems..."

They went to the Prosperity Inn, in the western part of the city. When they arrived at the door of the Inn, ten servants richly clad in brocade were waiting there. They came to them and greeted, "Our master humbly requests of the Master Taoist and Lord Guo, if they will agree to attend a banquet held at his modest residence." The red invitation card carried the respectful inscription "Your disciple Wanyan Kang invites".

"Well then," Wang Chuyi said, shaking his head. "We will come presently."

"These cakes and fruits," declared the leader of the servants, "are modest gifts from the Young Prince. If the Master Taoist and Lord Guo indicate to me where to place them, I will put them there." The servants presented twelve large boxes filled with various fresh fruits and fine cakes, all looking very appetizing.

"Brother Huang Rong likes finely made pastries," Guo Jing thought, "I'll keep some for him." Because of his aversion to Wanyan Kang, Wang Chuyi intended to return the gifts. But, seeing that Guo Jing seemed to appreciate them, he ordered them to leave them at the counter. "Young people are covetous," he thought with a smile. "It's normal..." They then went to Mu Yi's room. He was stretched out on the bed, his face pale, his daughter in tears sitting by his bedside. Seeing Wang and Guo entering, they let out a gasp of surprise. The girl rose to her feet and the man tried to get up.

Wang Chuyi examined Mu Yi's wounds. On each hand, the five wounds dug by the fingers of Wanyan Kang were open to the bone; as if they had been inflicted by a weapon. The hands were extremely swollen so they had been coated with alleviating balsam but, because of the fear of infection, no bandages had been applied. Wang Chuyi could not



understand the nature of the wound, "Who taught Wanyan Kang such a cruel and brutal technique? Looking at the seriousness of those wounds, it seemed it would take a long time for someone to reach this level of power. How could Brother Qiu not realize this; or, if he had some idea about it, why didn't he do anything to stop him?" He turned to the girl, "Young lady, you are...?"

"I am called Mu Nianci (Nianci: 'to remember the mother')," she answered, casting a grateful glance towards Guo Jing before bowing her head. Guo Jing saw that the banner pole was at the foot of the bed, but the banner itself, with its inscription 'Joust to find a Spouse', had been torn to shreds.

"Don't you want to find a husband?" he wondered in surprise.

"Your father's injury is quite serious," continued Wang. "It should be looked after properly." Seeing the destitute manner in which they lived, he understood that the father and the girl had few means and would have probably found it very hard to find money for medicines. He took two silver yuan bao [small boat shaped silver ingots] from his pocket and placed them on the table. "I will return to see you tomorrow," he promised. Without awaiting the thanks of Mu Yi and his daughter, he took Guo Jing by the arm and they left. At the door of the inn, the four brocade clothed servants advanced towards them and bowed, "Our young Master awaits your honored visit, please follow us." Wang Chuyi agreed.

"Master," Guo Jing said, "wait for me one moment." He turned and ran to the counter of the inn, opened the boxes of delicacies given by Wanyan Kang, chose four cakes, carefully wrapped them in a handkerchief and put them in his pocket. Then he followed Wang Chuyi to the residence.

On the two sides of the large bright red door, flags were hung on high poles. Two jade lions, majestic and fierce, stood guard. A flight of white jade stairs led to the large hall. The effect was impressive. Above the large door, there was an inscription in gold letters: 'Residence of Prince Zhao'.

Guo Jing knew that 'Prince Zhao' is the title of the Sixth Prince of the Jin Empire, Wanyan Honglie. "So," he said nervously to himself, "this Young Prince is the son of Wanyan Honglie. He knows me; it'll be dangerous if I come across him!" As he hesitated, there came the sound of drums and trumpets.

The Young Prince, wearing a gold crown, a red tunic, and a gold belt tied around his waist, descended the stairs to meet them. However, he had a black eye, and a swollen face, marks from the keen combat of a few hours earlier. Guo Jing was not much better off, having a swollen eye, swollen lips and a bruised face. Both were amused, and could not prevent themselves from smiling. Seeing Wanyan Kang's luxurious garb, Wang's eyebrows came together and he followed him to a large room without saying a word. Wanyan Kang invited him to sit in the place of honor.

"It's a distinguished honor that Master Taoist and Brother Guo have agreed to come here!"

Since he did not kowtow to him and did not seem to recognize his membership in the Quanzhen Sect, Wang felt anger rise within him. "How many years were you taught martial arts by your Shifu?" he asked.

"I know nothing of martial arts," Wanyan Kang answered, laughing. "My Shifu gave me lessons for several years, but what he taught me would make you laugh, because it was no more than a three-legged cat's skills."

"The skills of the Quanzhen Sect are nothing exceptional," Wang said, containing his anger, "but it is nonetheless better than a three-legged cat's skill. Did you know your Shifu will arrive in a few days?"

"My Shifu is here," retorted Wanyan Kang, still smiling. "Do you wish to see him, Master?"

"Where is he?" exclaimed Wang Chuyi, amazed.

Without waiting for him to answer, Wanyan Kang struck his hands together, and ordered, "Serve the banquet!" Then he took his two guests towards the banquet hall. They crossed through several corridors and several decorated pavilions. Guo Jing, who had never seen such a luxurious residence, was overwhelmed. But he was especially worried about the coming confrontation with Wanyan Honglie because he didn't know what he should do. "The great Khan wants me to assassinate the prince," he thought, "but it turns out his son is the disciple of Taoist Elder Qiu! Should I kill the prince or not?" He could not decide, so uneasiness plagued him.

In the banquet hall, six or seven people already awaited them. One of them had three lumps on his face; it was Hou Tonghai, the 'Three-Headed Dragon'. He looked at them with hands on his hips and an angry face. Guo Jing made a movement of retreat, then, reassured, he thought that the presence of the Taoist Elder at his side would dissuade Hou from undertaking anything. However, not being able to suppress a feeling of apprehension, he averted his head and avoided the glance of his adversary. Then, recalling the foolish behavior of Hou during the chase with Huang Rong, he laughed inside.

"Taoist Elder," Wanyan Kang said with a charming expression on his face, "Here are several people who

admire you and have wished, for a long time, to get acquainted. You have already met Chief Peng. This is the honorable Liang Ziwing, also called the 'Ginseng Immortal', who is from the Mountain of Eternal Whiteness."

Liang Ziwing, an old man with a florid face and immaculate hair, greeted him by joining his hands. "What an honor to meet the Perfect Wang, the 'Immortal with the Iron Foot'! I will now be able to claim that my voyage beyond the Pass has not been in vain. This is Supreme Virtue Ling Zhi, also known as Distinguished Big-hand, from the 'Secret School' of Tibet. I myself come from the northeast, he from the southwest; it had required a voyage of tens of thousands of Li so one could say that ours is a predestined encounter."

Obviously, Liang Ziwing was a very glib talker. Wang Chuyi greeted Supreme Virtue Ling Zhi, and the lama [a Tibetan religious leader] answered by joining his hands. Suddenly, a raucous voice was heard. "Because they feel supported by the Absolute Perfection Sect [Quanzhen] maybe that is why the Seven Freaks of Jiangnan dare to be so conceited!"

Wang Chuyi turned his head and saw a completely bald man with a gleaming skull and bulging red eyes. That man reminded him of someone. "Is it possible that are you the venerable Sha, the Dragon King of the Demonic Group?"

"Precisely," the man retorted with an angry voice. "So, you still remember my name!"

"We have never met," Wang thought, "in what affair could I have offended him?"

"I've long heard of your great reputation," he answered in a conciliatory tone, "and I much admire you."

This Dragon King of the Demonic Group was Sha Tongtian, and he was much abler than his martial brother Hou

Tonghai. However, he possessed a quick temper and was constantly angry when teaching. That was why he had only been able to transmit a negligible part of his ability to his four disciples. It was also the reason why the “Four Demons of the Yellow River”, when they fought against Guo Jing in Mongolia, were not able to win and lost face in front of Wanyan Honglie. Since then, Prince Zhao did not grant the four men any credibility. When he heard about that, Sha Tongtian fell into a terrible rage; he punished his unworthy disciples viciously and the four demons nearly turned into four ghosts. He ordered his brother-in-arms to capture Guo Jing, but Hou Tonghai turned into a teasing object for Huang Rong and underwent an even greater humiliation.

More and more annoyed, Sha Tongtian, no longer concerned about courtesy in front of others, sprang towards Guo Jing, his hands forming claws. Guo Jing retreated two steps. Wang Chuyi, with a protective move, put himself in front of Guo Jing.

“Do you really want to protect this little rascal?” Sha exclaimed angrily. And he struck a palm in the direction of Wang. Wang, considering the brutality of the attack, was forced to defend himself. Their two palms clashed, and as they were about to channel their internal energy, a man suddenly appeared. With his hands, he pressed their wrists and separated them. Wang and Sha felt a shock sensation and withdrew their hands immediately. Being eminent personalities of the Jianghu realm both had anticipated the real abilities of their adversary and had already activated their internal energy. That someone was able to separate them so easily with such a move was unbelievable to them!

The man, dressed in white, wore a light fur coat and a broad belt. Aged about thirty-five or thirty-six years, he moved elegantly, had a distinguished appearance and an undeniable martial air. He seemed to be the scion of a noble

family. "This is," Wanyan Kang said laughing, "the Junior Chief of the White Camel Mountain from the Kunlun mountain range in the Western Territories. His name is Ouyang Ke. The Honorable Ouyang has never been in the Central Plains before. You all meet him for the first time."

The sudden appearance of this man surprised not only Wang Chuyi and Guo Jing, but Peng Lianhu and Liang Ziwong as well, who also didn't know him. After seeing a demonstration of his ability, everyone secretly felt respect; but nobody had ever heard of the White Camel Mountain in the Western Territories.

"Brothers, I should have arrived in the capital several days ago," Ouyang Ke said, greeting everyone. "But I ran into a small hitch along the way which caused a delay; that is why I have just arrived, please excuse me."

After learning that he was the Junior Chief of the White Camel Mountain, Guo Jing knew that he was connected to those young women wearing white clothes who had tried to steal his horse on the road. He felt his heart tighten. "Have my six Shifus clashed with him?" he wondered. "Have they been injured?"

Wang Chuyi knew that all the men were of frightening ability. He had experienced the pressure of Ouyang Ke's hand and had displayed internal energy by no means inferior to his own, though it contained a strange viciousness.

If dialogue turned out to be impossible and it became a fight, he was not even sure of being able to beat Ouyang Ke. Should they attack en masse, how could they defend themselves? "And your Shifu," he asked Wanyan Kang, "why don't you ask him to come in?"

"I will," the young man agreed, turning to his servants. "Request Shifu to come and meet the visitors."

Wang Chuyi felt reassured. "If Brother Qiu is here," he mused, "though the enemy are dominant in numbers, we will be able to at least remain unscathed."

Some time later, they heard the noise of boots. Through the large door a big old officer of forty years, with a thick beard and dressed in brocade entered with a martial air. Wanyan Kang advanced. "Shifu," he said respectfully. "This Taoist Elder wishes to see you, and has already asked about you on several occasions."

Wang felt an upwelling of anger. "Ah, wicked one," he thought, "you dare to make fun of me? The way this officer moves, he can't have any remarkable skills; he is certainly not the one who taught this rascal his strange techniques."

"Taoist," the officer said, "what do you want from me? Normally I hate seeing monks or priests."

Wang's anger was so strong that he burst out laughing. "I would like," he said, "to request alms from Your Excellency, a thousand silver taels."

The officer was called Tang Zude, captain of Prince Zhao's personal guard. When Wanyan Kang was small, Tang Zude had given him some martial arts lessons; that's why everybody in the household called him 'Shifu'. Hearing this outrageous request from Wang Chuyi, he was startled. "Rubbish!" he retorted.

"A thousand taels of silver," Wanyan Kang said, "is nothing, nothing at all. Let someone quickly prepare a thousand silver taels and present it to the venerable Taoist." Tang Zude remained baffled. He examined Wang Chuyi from tip to toe with his mouth agape, then upwards again, without

managing to understand why anyone should show such benevolence.

"Everyone please take a seat," Wanyan Kang invited. "Taoist Elder Wang, it's the first time you've come to us, the place of honor is reserved for you."

Wang Chuyi refused modestly, but ended up settling in the place of honor. Three rounds of wine were served. "You are all eminent personalities of the Jianghu realm," Wang declared then. "You all shall judge how we'll settle the affair of Mr. Mu and his daughter." All eyes were fixed on Wanyan Kang, waiting to see his reaction.

Wanyan Kang poured wine and raised the wine cup. Respectfully presenting the cup before Wang, he said, "Senior [qianbei], do me the honor and accept this cup first. As for the affair in question, it will be dealt with according to Senior's instructions, your Junior [wanbei] dare not disobey."

Wang was amazed to hear him giving in so easily. He took the cup and drank the wine in one go. "Very well," he said. "Let us bring Mr. Mu here and let him speak."

"Someone must bring him here," Wanyan Kang said. "Could I charge Brother Guo with the task of bringing Mr. Mu here?" Wang Chuyi nodded.

Guo Jing immediately left the banquet to go to the Prosperity Inn. But Mu Yi's room was empty; the father and the girl had left, taking all their belongings with them. When asked, the boy at the inn answered that someone had come seeking them, paid for the room and the meals, but he could not say who. Guo Jing hurriedly returned to the residence of Prince Zhao, where Wanyan Kang greeted him with a great smile. "Brother Guo, thank you for your efforts. Where is Mr. Mu?" Guo Jing told him that he had sought



him in vain. "Ah, it is my fault," Wanyan Kang sighed. Turning to one of his servants, he ordered, "Take several men with you and go quickly in all directions. We absolutely must find Mr. Mu!" The servant obeyed and left.

Without the main person of interest, it was impossible to continue. Wang Chuyi could say nothing, but his head was full of suspicions. "To go and seek Mr. Mu," he said to himself, "one or two servants are enough. This rascal insisted that Guo Jing should go, obviously he wanted Guo Jing himself to discover the departure of Mu, and give testimony of it."

"It doesn't matter that a mysterious thing happened," he sneered, "in the end the truth will always triumph."

"Taoist Elder, you have reason to believe that Mr. Mu did mysterious things?" Wanyan Kang answered laughing, "That is really odd!"

The officer Tang Zude, already furious to see how easily the Taoist had extorted a thousand silver taels, found it intolerable to see him also showing insolence to the Young Prince. He vented his anger, "Taoist, to which temple do you belong? What right do you have to swindle our Master?"

"Officer," Wang Chuyi retorted. "To which country do you belong? What right do you have to occupy an official position here?" He had noticed that Tang Zude was Chinese, but occupied an officer's rank in the Jin army. He was benefiting from the oppression of his compatriots, and it was for this reason he made fun of him. The thing that Tang Zude hated most was people mentioning that he is Chinese. He regarded himself to be highly skilled in martial arts, loyal and willing to risk his life for the Jin, yet they still do not allow him to lead an army. He had worked hard for twenty years but was kept in Prince Zhao's residence for

show. Wang Chuyi's comments had hit his sore point and his face changed as he roared in anger. He stood up, opposite Liang Ziwing and Ouyang Ke and released a fist towards Wang Chuyi's face.

The later glanced at the fist coming towards him, stretched out two fingers of his left hand to grab Tang Zude's wrist, laughing, "Even if you are not willing to answer, there is no need to resort to violence is there?"

Tang Zude's fist was stopped in mid-air and was unable to move. He was surprised but angry, and scolded, "Brilliant witchcraft, you used witchcraft!" He used his strength to release his fist but was unable to. He scowled, feeling very embarrassed.

Liang Ziwing, who was sitting beside him, laughed, "General, do not fret, come and sit down for a cup of wine." And with that, he stretched out his fingers towards Tang Zude's left shoulder.

Wang Chuyi was aware that although his two fingers could suppress Tang Zude's fist, he knew they would be unable to stop Liang Ziwing's move. He released Tang's wrist and aimed a finger at Tang Zude's right shoulder. With this quick change of moves, Liang Ziwing was unable to restrain himself and two fingers pressed both sides of Tang Zude's shoulder at the same time. It is really an honor for Tang Zude to have two highly skilled fighters ambushing him at the same time. Both his hands uncontrollably punched forward. With the sounds of two crashes, his left hand punched into a plate of left-over fish and his right hand entered a bowl of hot and sour soup. The two dishes broke into small pieces. The fish bones and broken fragments of the dishes pierced Tang Zude's hands, mixing flesh and blood with remains of the soup, causing him to yell in pain.

The crowd laughed loudly and quickly moved aside. Tang Zude, by this time very embarrassed and furious, dashed out of the hall. The servants, suppressing their laughter, moved forward to clean up the mess. Sha Tongtian marveled, "The Quanzhen Sect really lives up to its name! This Brother wants Taoist Wang to enlighten me on something."

Wang Chuyi replied, "It's nothing much, please ask, elder Sha."

Sha Tongtian replied, "The Yellow River Clan and Quanzhen Sect have long been at peace; why does Taoist Wang make things difficult for this brother by going out of his way to support the 'Seven Freaks of Jiangnan'? The Quanzhen Sect may have many disciples, but this brother is not afraid."

Wang Chuyi replied, "I think there is some misunderstanding. I have heard of the 'Seven Freaks of Jiangnan' but I don't know any of them. I have a martial brother who made a little bet with them. But I have never planned on helping the 'Seven Freaks of Jiangnan' against Yellow River Clan."

Sha Tongtian exclaimed, "That's good. Then please hand over this rascal to me." As he spoke, he reached forward to grab Guo Jing's throat.

Wang Chuyi knew that Guo Jing would be unable to avoid that grab and would get injured. He stretched out his arm to push Guo Jing's shoulders gently. Guo Jing fell out of his chair uncontrollably and a "ke cha" sound was heard, as Sha Tongtian's five fingers changed direction towards the floor and the back of his chair was broken. This 'Claw Smashing Wood like Bean Curd' is indeed one of the least seen but powerful moves in the Wulin world.

Sha Tongtian, who failed to grab Guo Jing, furiously asked, "So you are going to protect this rascal?"

Wang Chuyi replied, "I brought this child in, so I will naturally bring him out safely. Why does brother Sha not let him off today and find him on another day?"

Ouyang Ke spoke up, "This young chap offended brother Sha, let's talk this out shall we?"

Sha Tongtian thought, "This Taoist priest's skills are definitely not below mine; my martial brother and I, together, may not be able to make that little rascal stay behind. This Ouyang Ke has good skills and I'm not sure of his background; if he joins up with that idiot, then there will be trouble." He then spoke, "I have four useless disciples who followed Prince Zhao to Mongolia on a big mission. They were about to succeed when this rascal, whose surname is Guo, appeared and spoiled everything, making Prince Zhao extremely furious. Gentlemen, please think, if we cannot even overcome a little rascal, how can we accept the invitation to eat and drink in the residence of Prince Zhao?"

Although Sha Tongtian was very bad-tempered and rash, he was not stupid; with this speech, Guo Jing immediately became the centre of suspicion. With the exception of Wang Chuji and Guo Jing, everyone else here was invited by Prince Zhao. Wanyan Kang is Prince Zhao's eldest son. After hearing what Sha Tongtian said, he too was a little displeased, so everyone present decided to capture Guo Jing and present him to Prince Zhao.

Wang Chuyi was anxious deep down and tried to think of a plan to escape, but there were so many strong opponents that it was quite impossible to do so. He'd actually thought that, since Wanyan Kang is his martial brother's disciple

and even though he is a Jin, he wouldn't dare attack his teacher's martial brother. However, he did not expect Wanyan Kang to be so arrogant and had even planned to trap them with the help of skilled experts. If he had known this would happen, he would not have come so rashly; but even had he known, he wouldn't have brought Guo Jing along. If he wanted to leave, no one had any reason to stop him; but escaping with Guo Jing would be very difficult. He thought, "In this situation, it's best to delay things." Then he said, "Every single one of you is highly skilled and well-known; I have the utmost respect for each of you. To be able to meet you all today is my honor." Pointing to Guo Jing, "This child is unaware of the serious trouble he has caused all of you by offending elder Sha. If you want him to stay, I am powerless to stop it, but even so, I cannot agree to it. Thus, I daringly request that each of you display your superior skills to Guo Jing so as to let him know that it is not that I don't want to fight, it's because I am unable to help him."

Hou Tonghai had been suppressing his boredom all the while and immediately jumped out of his chair and pulled up his sleeve, "Let me be the first to taste your skills."

Wang Chuyi replied, "My shallow skills are unworthy to exchange moves with those present. I hope that brother Hou's superior skills will impress and teach this little rascal a lesson, and allow him to become aware of the existence of many skilled experts so that he won't dare to be arrogant in the future." Hou Tonghai had the feeling that there was sarcasm hidden in his words, but didn't know what it was and was unsure how to answer.

Sha Tongtian thought, "It's very tough to compete with Taoists from the Quanzhen Sect. It's also good that I don't have to do so." Turning to Hou Tonghai, "Martial brother,

why not display the 'Burying One in the Snow' skill for elder Wang."

The snow outside had not stopped. Hou Tonghai rushed to the centre of the courtyard and swept both of his arms up, drawing the snow in until there was a huge pile in front of him. He used his legs to arrange the pile neatly, retreated three steps then flipped upside down and with a 'pa' sound, he thrust himself forward and landed in the middle of the snow pile. The snow was not up to his chest. Guo Jing rubbed his head in confusion when he saw this skill because Hou Tonghai's head was in the snow pile, motionless.

Sha Tongtian turned to Wanyan Kang and the others and said, "Everyone, please kick all the remaining snow onto the pile which my brother Hou's head is in." The audience was curious and laughingly kicked the snow, making the pile even deeper. Sha Tongtian and Hou Tonghai frequently practiced in the Yellow River, thus their water skills are excellent. Those who practice water skills focus on controlling their breathing while under water and Hou Tonghai was able to bury his head in the snow without breathing and then use kung fu to fly out after a long while. The audience raised their cups of wine and praised this display of skill; after along while, Hou Tonghai finally use both his palms to sweep his head out of the snow and flipped back to a normal standing position. Guo Jing, being an inexperienced youth, was the first to applaud loudly. However, Hou Tonghai merely returned to his seat and drank a cup of wine, before staring at Guo Jing fiercely.

Guo Jing saw that there were the remains of snow on Hou Tonghai's head and couldn't control himself, he said, "Third master Hou; there's snow on your head." Hou Tonghai angrily retorted, "I am known as the 'Three-Headed Dragon', but I am not third in position, why call me third master? Even if I am fourth master Hou, is it any of your

business? How would I not know if my head has snow on it? I wanted to wipe it away, but now that you mentioned it, I will purposely not do it!" The warm temperature in the room caused the snow on his head to melt and drops of water ran down Hou Tonghai's head. But he is a stubborn man who keeps to his word, so no matter what, he did not even try to wipe the water off his face.

Sha Tongtian said. "My martial brother's skills are rough and clumsy, please pardon him." With that, he stretched his hand into a plate, grabbed some melon seeds, and shot the seeds out in a straight line with a flick of his middle finger. The seeds stuck into the snow pile which Hou Tonghai had earlier made and formed a 'huang' [yellow] character. The snow pile was quite a distance from Sha Tongtian's seat and yet, he was still able to neatly form a word on it using the melon seeds. His eyesight and accuracy was indeed amazing.

Wang Chuyi thought, "No wonder the 'Dragon King of the Demonic Group' rules the Yellow River area, his skills are indeed spectacular." Turning his head, he saw that the snow pile had received another wave of seeds, forming the 'he' [river] character and the 'jiu' [nine] character; it seemed Sha Tongtian wanted to form four words, reading 'huang he jiu qu' [Nine Songs of the Yellow River].

Peng Lianhu laughed, "Brother Sha, I cannot help but admire your remarkable finger skills. Let us make a deal; since elder Wang wants to study our skills, I will borrow Brother Sha's finger skills to display some of my own." With that, he threw his body forward and landed near the doorway. By this time, Brother Sha had already shot out the rest of the seeds to form the remaining 'qu' [song] character. Peng Lianhu suddenly stretched out both hands to catch the seeds; it looked as if he were picking the seeds from midair. The seeds were very tiny and traveled at

amazing speed, but Peng Lianhu did not miss a single one and had them all in his hands.

The audience broke into praise and Peng Lianhu retuned to his seat with a smile. Only then did Sha Tongtian manage to finish forming the 'qu' [song] character with the seeds. Peng Lianhu's sudden display did steal away some of Sha Tongtian's limelight, but the two were very close and Sha Tongtian did not seem displeased and even smiled a little. He turned to Ouyang Ke and asked, "What does master Ouyang plan on displaying to enlighten us inexperienced people?"

Ouyang Ke heard the sarcasm in Sha Tongtian's words and knew that he was still sore at him for interrupting his hits earlier. He thought hard about what to display so as to make Sha Tongtian admire him. At that moment, the servants brought in four types of dessert and replaced the used chopsticks with clean ones. Ouyang Ke snatched up the used chopsticks and, with a wave of his hand, twenty chopsticks flew out at the same time, stuck into the snow and neatly formed four flower shapes. To throw a chopstick and stick it into the snow with a wave of the hand is child's play, but to neatly form the shape of a flower using twenty chopsticks was more difficult. This skill was deep and complex, so much so that Guo Jing and Wanyan Kang were not able to comprehend it fully; but people such as Wang Chuyi and Sha Tongtian secretly praised him.

Considering the high number of experts, Wang Chuyi thought, "One of them would be quite a handful, yet there are so many gathered together here. Why? Even people like the young Chief of White Camel Mountain, 'Supreme Virtue' Ling Zhi and the 'Ginseng Immortal', who do not reside on the central plains are here. There must be a dangerous plan here!"



The 'Ginseng Immortal', Liang Ziwing laughed as he stood up and acknowledged the group. He reached the centre of the courtyard with light steps. He stretched out his right foot and lightly landed on the chopsticks, which Ouyang Ke had stuck into the snow. Then he started his display of skills , 'Hugging the Moon', 'Two Gentlemen up the Hills', 'Pulling the Arrow', 'Turning Without Shoes', and then displayed his 'Sparrow Light Fists'. His feet looked like he was jumping one moment and flying at the next moment; every step he took would end by landing on a chopstick. After his 'Giving Way to Step on a Tiger' and 'Retreating to Wrap it Up', Liang Ziwing finished his display with his 'Sparrow Light Fists'. The amazing thing was that the twenty chopsticks were still neatly in place. With a satisfied smile on his face, Liang Ziwing retreated back to his seat. The hall exploded into applause and even Guo Jing praised him. At this moment, the banquet ended and the servants brought golden bowls of warm water for the guests to wash up a little.

Wang Chuyi thought, "Now, Superior Virtue, Ling Zhi will display his skills before they all attack." Wang Chuyi glanced his way only to see him still dipping his hands in the water slowly, disregarding everything else. After everyone finished washing, his hands were still in the bowl of water, as if thinking of something. Everyone was feeling a bit curious and after a while, steam began rising from his bowl. The bowl made a noise just before bubbles rose from the bottom of the bowl as if water was boiling. Wang Chuyi was secretly anxious, "His internal energy is powerful! I have to take a chance and attack first."

Because all the attention was focused on Ling Zhi, Wang Chuyi thought, "I have to take them by surprise and make the first move to gain the upper hand." Suddenly, he flew forward, with supreme speed, caught and pulled Wanyan

Kang away with his right hand, before sealing his accupoints. Sha Tongtian and the rest were taken by surprise and did not know how to react.

Wang Chuyi picked up a bottle of wine with his left hand and said, "To be able to meet with so many heroes today is my honor, let me give a toast to everyone." From the bottle he took a large mouthful, spat out and drops of wine landed in everyone's cup. It didn't matter whether the person's cup was near or far away from him, or whether the cups were half-filled or empty, the wine kept landing accurately in the cups. Afterwards, every cup had the same proportion of wine, and there was not a single drop of wine spilled. From the way Wang Chuyi spat the wine, 'Supreme Virtue' Ling Zhi knew that he had excellent internal energy. Also he was able to hold the wine bottle in one hand while holding Wanyan Kang with the other. Although they knew that it was possible to attack Wang Chuyi at this moment, no one dared to for fear of Wanyan Kang getting hurt. Wang Chuyi poured wine for himself and Guo Jing, and then, raising his cup, said calmly, "I have no animosity towards anyone and have no strong ties with little brother Guo; but seeing that he is compassionate, heroic and has backbone, I want to plead with all present to let him go on my behalf."

Everyone was silent. Wang Chuyi continued, "If everyone is magnanimous, I will free the little prince. A royal descendent in exchange for a commoner is a very good trade, right?"

Liang Ziwong laughed, "Since Taoist Wang is so forthright, it's a deal." Without a moment's hesitation, Wang Chuyi released Wanyan Kang. Wang Chuyi knew that although these people were well-known for their evil, cold-blooded, unorthodox and underhanded ways, they would not dare to break their promise and attack in front of their fellow Wulin experts for fear of tarnishing their reputation.

Wang Chuyi took Guo Jing's hand and said, "I bid you farewell and may we meet again". The crowd, unable to stop them, watched their prey escape from the trap, sighed and looked crushed.

Wanyan Kang recovered and laughed, "Taoist Wang is superior, please feel free to visit anytime so that I can learn from the great elder."

Wang Chuyi snorted, "I haven't solved our problem; we will definitely meet again."

As they walked towards the doorway, 'Supreme Virtue' Ling Zhi suddenly said, "The Taoist elder has brilliant skills of which I am in awe." He joined his palms in the prayer position and bowed. Suddenly, he released both palms in the air and dashed forward with all his might.

Wang Chuyi also pushed out both his palms in defense, using internal energy to meet Ling Zhi's blow. Just as the palms were about to meet, Ling Zhi suddenly switched from internal to external energy and used his left hand to grab Wang Chuyi's wrist. Wang Chuyi reacted swiftly by grabbing his opponent's wrist; both sides used their utmost force and both wrists met briefly before separating.

Ling Zhi's face paled but he forced himself to say, "I really admire the Taoist skills."

Before retreating Wang Chuyi laughed, "The Abbot is famous throughout Wulin, but why do you not keep your word?"

'Supreme Virtue' Ling Zhi was furious and spat out, "I wanted to make you stay behind, not the Guo rascal...." He had received a blow from Wang Chuyi and was injured; had he quietly sat down to recuperate, it would not have become serious. But being mocked by Wang Chuyi had

made him furious and he had not finished speaking when he vomited a mouthful of blood. Wang Chuyi did not dare stay any longer and took Guo Jing's hand and quickly made his way out. Sha Tongtian, Peng Lianhu and the rest did not want to break their promise and, seeing that 'Supreme Virtue' Ling Zhi had suffered, they did not move forward to stop them.

Wang Chuyi had left quickly and was quite a distance from Prince Zhao's residence before he turned back to check if there was anyone behind them. When he confirmed that there was no one, he quietly said to Guo Jing, "Carry me back to the inn."

Hearing his weak voice, Guo Jing was shocked; he studied Wang Chuyi's face and saw that it was pale and he looked very sick. It was a vast difference from the quick and swift Wang Chuyi of earlier on. Guo Jing quickly asked, "Taoist Wang, are you injured?"

Wang Chuyi nodded and could not balance himself properly. Guo Jing quickly lowered his back to carry Wang Chuyi and hurried to a large inn. He was about to enter when Wang Chuyi whispered, "Find...find the most isolated.... and smallest.... smallest inn."

Guo Jing thought for awhile and then understood that Wang Chuyi was afraid that enemies may be looking for them. If they met rivals, with Wang Chuyi injured and him lowly skilled, they would definitely lose. With that thought, Guo Jing lowered his head and started running to look for another inn. Guo Jing was unfamiliar with the city and headed for roads with very few people on them; the further he went, the more deserted the road became. He felt Wang Chuyi's breathing getting weaker and weaker before he found a very small inn. The inn was small and dirty, but

fearing for Wang Chuyi's safety, he immediately dashed in and laid Wang Chuyi down.

Wang Chuyi said, "Find me a big tub...of water.....fresh...clean water...hurry...hurry up."

Guo Jing asked, "Is there anything else?"

Wang Chuyi remained silent and just waved his hands to hurry Guo Jing. Guo Jing hurried out of the room and asked a waiter to help him prepare the water. He gave him some money for doing so and then rewarded the boy with some extra coins.

Since Guo Jing had come to the central plains, he'd learned the importance of bribing. The inn boy was overjoyed and quickly fetched a huge tub and filled it with clean water. Guo Jing went back to inform Wang Chuyi that the water was ready. Wang Chuyi responded, "Good...good child, now put me in the water...don't allow...anyone to come in here."

Guo Jing did not understand why Wang Chuyi wanted to do this but did as he was told. The clean water covered Wang Chuyi except for his head. Guo Jing instructed the inn boy to keep everyone out. Wang Chuyi sat quietly with his eyes closed and breathed deeply. After awhile, the water turned black and colour began to return to his cheeks. Wang Chuyi said to Guo Jing, "Help me out and change the water."

Guo Jing changed the water and helped Wang Chuyi in again. It was some time before Guo Jing realized that Wang Chuyi was using his internal energy to force out the poison in him and allowing it to float in the water. Guo Jing changed the water four times before no more poison came out of Wang Chuyi and the water stayed clear.

Wang Chuyi finally smiled and said, "It's okay now." He climbed out of the water and sighed, "That lama's skills are

deadly.” Guo Jing was relieved and asked whether there was poison on the lama’s palms. Wang Chuyi replied, “Yes, I have seen the ‘Poison Sand Palms’ many times, but this is the strongest one yet. It almost cost me my life.”

Guo Jing replied, “Luckily you are alright now. What do you want to eat? I’ll ask the inn boy to buy something.” Wang Chuyi asked Guo Jing to borrow some ink and a brush before writing down a list of medicines.

Wang Chuyi explained, “ Although my life is not in danger now, my internal organs are not fully cleansed of the poison; if I do not cleanse the poison in twenty-four hours time, I may be crippled for life.”

Guo Jing took the medicine list and rushed out; he saw that there was a medicine shop nearby and quickly asked the owner for the medicine on the list. The owner checked his shelves, but returned empty-handed and said, “So sorry, you came at the wrong time, the medical herbs that you need are out of stock.”

Guo Jing did not wait for him to finish and dashed off to find another medicine shop. To his surprise, the second medicine shop he went to also didn’t have the things he wanted; it was the same result even after he went to eight other shops. Guo Jing was anxious and angry by then and ran to all the medicine shops in the city, only to get the same answer. They’d had a huge stock of the herbs he wanted but they’d been bought by someone earlier. It was then that Guo Jing realized that the people at the Zhao residence must have guessed that Wang Chuyi needed the medicine for his injury and purposely bought up all the medical herbs.

Dejected, Guo Jing returned to the inn and told Wang Chuyi what had happened. The latter responded with a sigh and

also looked dejected. Guo Jing was so miserable that he leaned on top of a table and cried. Wang Chuyi laughed, "Everyone has to die sooner or later; when is up to heaven, and we have no say. Besides, I may not die, so why all this crying?" Then he started singing.

Guo Jing dried his tears and felt better. Wang Chuyi laughed and sat upright on the bed and began using inner strength to recuperate.

Guo Jing did not dare to make any noise and crept out of the room, he suddenly thought, "If I rush to another nearby city, they may not have finished buying up the medicine."

Happily, he was about to set off when he saw the inn boy running towards him with a letter, on the top of the envelope it said, ' Please read it yourself, big brother Guo.'

Guo Jing felt curious and wondered who would write to him. He hurriedly tore open the letter and shook open a white piece of paper on which was written, 'I have something urgent to tell you, will be waiting for you at the small lake by the river which is ten meters west of the city.' At the bottom of the letter was a vivid drawing of a little beggar who was laughing, it was Huang Rong.

Guo Jing thought to himself, "How does he know that I am here?" and turned to the inn boy, "Who sent this letter?"

The inn boy replied, "It was brought here by a wandering commoner."

Guo Jing returned to his room and saw Wang Chuyi stretching his limbs. He said, "Taoist Elder Wang, I'm going to the nearby cities to buy the medicine."

Wang Chuyi answered, "If we thought of this, they will too, there's no need to go."

Guo Jing would not give up and was determined to try, he thought, "Brother Huang is so intelligent, I will discuss this with him first." He told Wang Chuyi, "My good friend wants to meet me, I will return afterwards." With that, he showed the letter to Wang Chuyi; the latter thought awhile and asked Guo Jing how he knew this fellow.

Guo Jing related the story to Wang Chuyi and the latter thought, "I saw how that fellow tricked Hou Tonghai; his skills are very weird and unusual...." He turned to Guo Jing and said, "You must be careful, this kid's skills are much higher than yours and seem unorthodox. I have not been able to guess his origins."

Guo Jing replied, "He is my newest best friend; he will not harm me."

Wang Chuyi sighed, "You have not known him for long; how can you be sure if he is truly your best friend? He may be small in size, but if he wants to trick you, you won't be able to defend yourself."

Guo Jing was not the least suspicious of Huang Rong and thought to himself, "Taoist Wang says this because he doesn't know brother Huang's character." And with that, began singing the praises of Huang Rong non-stop.

Wang Chuyi laughed and said, "Alright, go then, young people must meet some danger in order to gain experience. This person....considering his build and voice....he is not a.....can't you tell?"

Wang Chuyi stopped here and just shook his head. Guo Jing placed the list of medicines in his pocket and ran out. When he reached the outer city, he could see snow, but it was in isolated patches. He walked ten meters west and saw some reflections of water; it was indeed a small lake by the river. The weather was not that cold, so the lake was not frozen;



flower petals covered with snow floated on the water and beside the lake were rows and rows of plum trees. The plum flowers looked magnificent with the snow.

Guo Jing could not see anyone and for an anxious moment, he thought, "What if he waited for me too long and then left?" and began to shout, "Brother Huang, brother Huang."

Guo Jing suddenly heard a sound and turned around sharply, only to realize that it was made by river birds. Guo Jing was very disappointed, and called out two more times, before thinking, "Maybe he hasn't reached here yet, I'll wait for him." Sitting down by the lake, Guo Jing thought about Huang Rong, and then he thought about Wang Chuyi's injuries and was in no mood to enjoy the scenery. Besides, since he grew up in Mongolia he was used to seeing snow and he did not bother to look out for the differences in landscape between Mongolia and the central plains. He waited for a long while and suddenly heard some noises among the trees.

Feeling curious, he walked in that direction and heard a rough voice say, "Why still act like a big brother when all of us, including you, wasted time just now?" Another voice answered, "Damn it! If it were not for you being such a coward we would have won had the four of us ganged up on that one." Another answered, "What's the big deal? Even you tripped while running away." It sounded like the 'Four Demons of the Yellow River'.

Guo Jing summoned up his courage and stepped into the cluster of trees, only to see no one. He suddenly heard a voice, "If we had fought directly, how could we lose? But who would have thought that the little beggar had so many tricks up his sleeves..."

Guo Jing looked up and saw four men dangling in mid air from a tree, swinging to and fro, yet squabbling non-stop; it was indeed the 'Four Demons of the Yellow River'. His heart jumped for joy, since he knew that Huang Rong was nearby, and let out a laugh before asking, "Hey, are you guys practicing your lightness skills again?"

Qian Qingjian retorted angrily, "Who says that we are practicing our lightness skills? Haven't you got the eyes to see that we were hung up here?"

Guo Jing laughed loudly and Qian Qingjian angrily tried to use his leg to kick Guo Jing; but how could he when the distance between them was so large?

Ma Qingxiong scolded, "Rascal, if you don't go away, I will pee on you!"

Guo Jing laughed until he could hardly stand up and said, "I'll just move aside, then your pee can't reach me." Suddenly came the sound of gentle laughter and Guo Jing turned around, only to hear the splashing of water and saw a leaf floating down from a tree. Then, he saw a girl at the back of a boat, rowing gently. She had long hair below her shoulders, was dressed in white from head to toe and had some golden pins in her hair which shone like fire. Guo Jing thought the girl's dress looked like a fairy's and was dumbstruck. The boat slowly came nearer and he saw that the girl was barely fifteen or sixteen years of age. She had very smooth skin that was as white as snow, with beautiful color on her cheeks and had a beauty which was incomparable. Guo Jing was dumbstruck by her beauty and retreated a few steps before turning away, not daring to look at her.

The young girl tied the boat to the bank and called out, "Brother Jing, come on board!" Guo Jing was astonished,

and turned around, only to see the girl smiling sweetly and her robe floating gently in the wind. Guo Jing felt like he was in a dream and used both hands to rub his eyes.

The young girl giggled and said, "You don't recognize me?"

Guo Jing thought that she sounded like Huang Rong, but how can a dirty and lowly male beggar suddenly transform into a beautiful fairy? He couldn't believe his eyes.

He heard the voices of the 'Four Demons of the Yellow River' behind him shouting, "Little miss, cut the ropes that are hanging us up and let us down! If you help us, I'll give you a hundred taels of gold! Each one of us will give you a hundred taels; you'll get four hundred taels all together. We can even give you eight hundred taels!"

The young girl ignored them and smiled at Guo Jing, "I am your brother Huang, don't you care about me anymore?"

Guo Jing studied her face and saw that her features were exactly the same as Huang Rong's and stuttered, "You.....you....." he only managed to say the word, 'you' before stopping.

Huang gave a little laugh and said, "That I am actually a girl, who asked you to call me brother Huang? Hurry, come onto the boat." Guo Jing felt like he was dreaming, moved forward a little, and stumbled onto the boat. On the other hand, the 'Four Demons' kept making much noise in the background as they raised the amount of their reward.

Huang Rong rowed the boat to the middle of the lake, brought out some food and wine and giggled, "And don't you call me sister Huang, call me Rong'er. My dad always calls me that."

Guo Jing suddenly remembered something and said, "I brought some cakes for you." He took out the cakes that Wanyan Kang had given him and Wang earlier on. But because he had carried Wang Chuyi, taken care of him and ran around trying to find medicines, the cakes were smashed into little pieces.

Huang Rong saw the mess and laughed softly. Guo Jing reddened and said, "They can't be eaten now" and was about to throw them into the water when Huang Rong stretched out her hand and took the cakes from him saying, "I'd like to eat them." Guo Jing was surprised but she had already placed a small piece into her mouth and started eating. After watching her eat a few mouthfuls, his eyes grew red and tears started slowly forming, he didn't understand her actions.

Huang Rong said, "My mother died after I was born and no one has ever remembered my likes and habits so well before....." Then a few tears flowed from her eyes. She took out a clean handkerchief and Guo Jing thought that she was going to dry her eyes; but instead, she used it to wrap the smashed cakes and placed it in her pocket, before turning back to him with a smile, "I'll eat them slowly."

Guo Jing did not know much about romantic relationships, but he felt that 'brother Huang's' actions were very special and unique. He asked her, "You said you had something important to tell me; what is it?"

Huang Rong giggled, "I wanted to tell you that I'm not brother Huang but Rong'er, isn't that important?"

Guo Jing smiled and said, "You are so pretty, why disguise yourself as a little beggar?"

Huang Rong turned her head slightly and said, "You say I'm pretty?"

Guo Jing replied, "Yes, very beautiful, like the fairy on top of our snow mountain."

Huang Rong laughed and said, "You've seen a fairy?"

Guo Jing said, "Of course not, if I'd seen one, how can I still live?"

Huang Rong asked, "Why?"

Guo Jing replied, "The elders in Mongolia always say that whoever sees a fairy will never want to return to the grasslands again; he will just stay in a daze and freeze to death after a few days."

Huang Rong laughed and asked, "And do you feel dazed after seeing me?"

Guo Jing reddened and quickly answered, "We are good friends, so it's different."

Huang Rong nodded and said seriously, "I know you sincerely care for me, regardless of whether I'm a girl or a boy, pretty or ugly. If I dress like this, it's not surprising that people are good to me; but you were nice to me even when I dressed like a little beggar, so you are truly good to me." At this point, Huang Rong was in high spirits and smiled, "I'll sing a tune for you, alright?"

Guo Jing replied, "Can you sing tomorrow instead, we have to get medicine for Taoist Wang first." With that, he related the story of how Wang Chuyi got injured and how all the medicines were bought up by Wanyan Kang.

Huang Rong replied, "Ah, no wonder you were running anxiously from one medicine shop to another."

Guo Jing thought, "She was following me and that's how she knew where I stayed."

He said, "Brother Huang, may I ride your little red horse to buy the medicines?"

Huang Rong said seriously, "Firstly, I am not your brother Huang. Secondly, the horse is yours; do you think that I would actually take it? I just wanted to test you. Thirdly, you may not be able to get the medicine even if you travel to the nearby cities."

Hearing what she said, Guo Jing felt anxious. Huang Rong smiled a little and said, "I am going to sing now, listen well." Huang Rong gently turned her head, leaned to the edge of the boat, and then started singing in a crystal clear voice:

*"The wild geese penetrated the cold frost curtain.  
Tender ice covered the pale moon of the first month.  
The creek flowed like a comb on the bride's hair.  
Wishing to keep the fragrance of the face powder,  
looking at the adornment makes one difficult to study.  
The weak muscle delicate as jade, covered by layer upon  
layer of dragon-lining silk.  
With an easterly wind, one captivating smile,  
tens of thousands flowers bashfully hope to be left behind."*

*[Ignoring my own inadequacy, I tried to translate this part just for completeness sake – Frans Soetomo, after the chapter has been edited by the team of editors]*

Guo Jing listened carefully to each and every word. Although he didn't know the meaning, Huang Rong's voice was gentle and sweet such that he felt like he was in a daze. The beautiful scenery gave him a feeling of warmth that he had never felt before.

Huang Rong finished singing and said in a low voice, "This is a song composed by the official Xing, which describes the plum flowers which bloom after winter; was it good?"

Guo Jing replied, "I don't know about these things, but the song sounded very nice. Who is official Xing?"

Huang Rong answered, "Official Xing is Xing Qiji. My father says that he is a good official who loves his people. When the Jin captured the north and villains harmed mister Yue, official Xing was the only one left struggling to restore our lost lands."

Although Guo Jing often listened to his mother talk about how violent the Jin were, and how they mercilessly killed many Chinese, he had grown up in Mongolia and did not feel that strongly about the Jin. Guo Jing replied, "I have never been in the central plains before, you'll have to tell me the stories slowly another time, the most important thing now is to save Taoist Wang."

Huang Rong said, "Listen to me, we'll play just a little while longer so don't worry."

Guo Jing replied, "Taoist Wang said that if he doesn't take the medicine in twenty-four hours time, he will be crippled!"

Huang Rong retorted, "So let him be crippled; anyway, it's not you or me who will be crippled."

Guo Jing let out an "Ah" sound and jumped up saying, "This.....this....." his face became furious.

Huang Rong giggled, "Don't worry; I'll make sure that you get the medicine."

Guo Jing heard the confidence in her voice and thought, "She is much smarter than me, and besides, I don't have any brilliant ideas so maybe I should listen to her." He had no choice but to follow her wishes for the time being. They both clapped with laughter when she told of how she

tricked the 'Four Demons of the Yellow River' and how she teased Hou Tonghai. The combined colors of the white snow, the water in the lake and the plum flowers was beautiful; Huang Rong slowly stretched out her hand and put it into Guo Jing's and whispered, "I'm not afraid of anything now."

Guo Jing asked, "Why?"

Huang Rong replied, "Even if my father doesn't want me anymore, you will want me to follow you right?"

Guo Jing answered, "Of course. Rong'er, I...I...like...like being with you."

Huang Rong leaned gently on his chest and Guo Jing smelled a sweet scent surrounding his whole body, surrounding the lake, surrounding the whole world; he didn't know whether it was the plum flower scent or if it came from Huang Rong. The two just held hands silently. After a very, very long while, Huang Rong sighed and said, "It's so nice here, such a pity that we have to go."

Guo Jing asked, "Why?"

Huang Rong said, "Don't you want to get the medicine to save Taoist Wang?"

Guo Jing rejoiced, "Ah, where do we go then?"

Huang Rong asked, "Where have all the medicines in the shops gone to?"

Guo Jing answered, "The medicines have been bought up by people in Prince Zhao's residence."

Huang Rong said, "Yup, that's right, so we'll go to his residence and take it."



Guo Jing was shocked, "To Prince Zhao's residence?"

Huang Rong replied, "That's right!"

Guo Jing said, "We can't go there, we'll only lose our lives."

Huang Rong said, "Then you can bear to see Taoist Wang crippled? Or if his injuries take a turn for the worse, do you want to see him dead?"

Blood rushed up to his face and Guo Jing replied, "Alright, but you can't go."

Huang Rong asked, "Why?"

Guo Jing answered, "Just promise me that you won't go." But he couldn't find a reason.

Huang Rong lowered her voice and said, "I won't be able to stand it if you continue to worry for me. If you meet with any danger, how do you expect me to live alone?"

Guo Jing's heart gave a leap and gratitude, happiness, and love dashed into his mind; he suddenly felt a hundred times braver and wasn't the least afraid of people like Sha Tongtian and Peng Lianhu. It was as if nothing was impossible in the world. He said, "Alright, we will both go to get the medicine."

They rowed the boat to the bank and started towards the city. Halfway there, Guo Jing suddenly remembered that the 'Four Demons of the Yellow River' were still stuck in midair and said, "Hey, do you want to release those four people?"

Huang Rong giggled, "Those four fellows call themselves 'Iron Strong Heroes' so they are very powerful; they won't freeze or starve. Even if they do starve to death, 'Four Demons of the Plum Forest' is superior to the 'Four Demons of the Yellow River'."

## Chapter 9 - Iron Spear, Broken Plow

Translated by James Worsley and SunnySnow



*Yang Tiexin took down the rusty iron spear hanging on the wall; he gently stroked the spear shaft and sighed, "This iron spear is rusty. It has*

*not been used for a long while." Consort Wang spoke softly, "Please don't touch the spear, it is the most precious possession I have." "Really?" Yang Tiexin asked, "This spear used to have a matching partner, however today only one remains."*

Guo Jing and Huang Rong went to the back of Prince Zhao's palace and leaped over the wall into the courtyard. Huang Rong whispered to Guo Jing in a soft voice, "Your lightness kung fu is excellent!" Guo Jing, crouching by the foot of the wall watching out for any movement in the courtyard, felt ecstatic hearing such praise from her.

After a moment they heard footsteps approaching; two men were laughing and talking as they walked towards them. One man was saying "What do you think the young prince has in mind for the young lady?"

The other man laughed and said, "It's obvious isn't it? Although she is a pretty woman, after giving birth who would give her another glance?"

The first man retorted, "With your dirty mind, you had better be careful that the young prince doesn't cut your head off. Although this girl is pretty, she cannot compare with the princess."

The second man exclaimed, "She's peasant girl! How can you mention her and the princess in the same breath?"

The first man replied, "The princess, you said she..." He suddenly stopped, coughed twice and changed the subject saying, "The young prince really suffered a loss at the hands of that big fellow today, you'd better be careful not to

give him any cause for taking offence or you'll surely get a beating!"

The second man said, "If the young prince tries to beat me, I'll simply dodge - and return with a kick..."

The first man laughed, "Stop talking bull shit."

Guo Jing thought to himself "So Wanyan Kang already has a pretty sweetheart, no wonder he cannot marry the Mu girl. But if this is true, then he shouldn't have taken up the challenge in the first place let alone grab her shoe. Why would he concern himself with other people's affairs? Is it possible that a person, unwilling to agree to something, would use force to coerce them?"

At this point the two men had walked very close to Guo Jing and Huang Rong. One was carrying a lamp and the other a basket of food. They were servants wearing green clothes and caps. The man with the basket laughed and said "Speaking of other people, I fear that someone has become very hungry, we had better deliver these vegetables quickly!"

The other man replied "How can he win a young girl's heart if he doesn't gain her sympathy?" Both men laughed as they walked away into the night.

Huang Rong became very curious. She whispered to Guo Jing "Let's go and see what type of pretty girl they're talking about."

Guo Jing asked "What about getting the medicine, isn't that more urgent?"

"I want to see the girl first!" Huang Rong said stubbornly as she started off after the two servants.

Guo Jing thought "What's so interesting about seeing some girl? That's really strange." What he didn't know was that when a woman hears about another beautiful woman, she will never be satisfied until she has seen her with her own eyes. If the woman that hears about this other woman is herself especially beautiful, then the greater is the desire to see that other woman so she can compare herself with her! Guo Jing, however, did know enough about girls to know that they can be extremely difficult at times so he had no alternative but to follow.

The Zhao residence was huge. Guo Jing and Huang Rong followed the two servants for quite some time before arriving in front of a big building. At the entrance a few guards stood with weapons in hand. Guo Jing and Huang Rong hid behind a corner and heard the two servants whispering something to the guards before the guards opened the door and allowed them in. Huang Rong picked up a stone and threw it at the torches to put them out, before pulling Guo Jing along to follow the servants inside. Huang Rong was so swift that she and Guo Jing overtook the servants and were in front of them in a flash. The servants and guards didn't notice that they'd slipped in and cursed and joked while re-lighting the torches. The servants entered a large room, opened a small door in the corner, and walked in. Guo Jing and Huang Rong silently followed them and saw rows of iron bars forming a large prison cell. Behind the bars sat a woman and a man.

One of the servants lit a candle and placed it on a prison table. In the candlelight, Guo Jing saw the man's anxious and angry face; it was none other than Mu Yi. The young girl sitting beside him was his daughter, Mu Nianci. Guo Jing was suspicious and thought, "How did they end up here? Ah, Wanyan Kang captured them. What does he intend to do with them? Does he love this lady or not?" The

two servants took out some wine and dishes from their basket and pushed them into the cell.

Mu Yi picked up a plate of snacks and threw it out before yelling, "I have already fallen into your trap, so kill me if you want to. Why pretend to be nice?"

Amidst the commotion, the guard outside suddenly said, "Greetings, young Prince!"

Guo Jing and Huang Rong exchanged glances and hurriedly hid behind the door and saw Wanyan Kang rushing in and scolding, "Who made Hero Mu angry? Let's find out whether or not I will break your legs when I leave."

The two servants were frightened and dropped to their knees, "We dare not."

Wanyan Kang answered, "Hurry up and get out of here!"

The two servants replied, "Yes, yes." and turned to leave; but when they reached the door, they stuck their tongues out at each other and made funny faces as they left.

Wanyan Kang waited until they closed the door before saying gently, "I invited Hero Mu and Miss here for a different reason. Please don't be offended."

Mu Yi was furious, "You lock us up like prisoners and you dare use the word 'invite'?"

Wanyan Kang said, "I'm so sorry. Please bear with it for the time being. I really am sorry."

Mu Yi retorted angrily, "You can use this kind of talk to fool a three year old, but I've seen enough vicious officials to know better."

Wanyan Kang tried to speak several times but was shut up by the angry Mu Yi. Yet, he still remained good natured and laughed good humoredly without a hint of anger. Mu Nianci listened to the argument and whispered to her father, "Father, let's hear what he has to say." Mu Yi grunted before becoming silent.

Wanyan Kang said, "Your daughter has rare talents and beauty. I'm not blind so how can I possibly not like her?" Mu Nianci blushed deeply and lowered her head. Wanyan Kang continued, "However, I am the heir of Prince Zhao and my family rules are very strict. If people find out that I married a commoner, my father will be furious and face a lot of trouble."

Mu Yi replied, "Then what do you plan to do?"

Wanyan Kang replied, "I was thinking of letting Hero Mu and Miss stay here for a few days to recover from any injuries, before going back home. After a year and a half, when the situation is better, I will come to you and ask for your daughter's hand in marriage, or Hero Mu may send Miss to me so as to complete the marriage. Isn't that a perfect solution?"

Mu Yi remained silent, as though he was thinking about some other thing. Wanyan Kang continued, "My father has gotten into trouble because of me. The emperor even reprimanded him three months ago. If my father learns about this now, he will never agree to the marriage. I hope that Hero Mu keeps this a close secret."

Mu Yi became furious, "If I listen to what you say, then my daughter will suffer because everything has to be kept under wraps."

Wanyan Kang replied, "I have everything planned. I will get some grand officials to ask for her hand in marriage; it will

be a grand and joyous affair.”

Mu Yi’s faced suddenly paled and he said, “Please ask your mother to see me so that I can discuss the matter with her.”

Wanyan Kang smiled and said, “How can my mother meet you?”

Mu Yi yelled, “If I don’t get to meet your mother, I won’t give in to you no matter what you come up with.” With that, he picked up the jar of wine and threw it.

By the time Mu Nianci finished fighting with Wanyan Kang, she’d already fallen for him and was delighted when she heard his plan. But her father’s sudden outburst changed everything and she didn’t know whether she was surprised or dejected. Wanyan Kang moved quickly, caught the wine jar in time, and put it back on the table. He laughed and said, “I’m leaving.” before turning to go.

After hearing Wanyan Kang’s words, Guo Jing felt that the Prince was reasonable and had a very good plan; but who would expect Mu Yi to lose his temper. He thought, “I’ll try to convince him.” He was about to go to him when Huang Rong pulled his sleeve and took him out of the building.

They heard Wanyan Kang ask a servant, “Have you brought it?” The servant nodded and raised his hand to reveal a rabbit. Wanyan Kang took the rabbit from him and broke it’s hind legs, before placing it in his pocket and hurrying off. Guo Jing and Huang Rong were curious and followed behind him. After a while, they saw a small three-roomed hut. It was a normal looking hut like any commoner’s, but looked out of place amongst the grand surroundings of the Zhao residence. Now they were very curious. Wanyan Kang opened the door and entered the hut. They silently moved to the back of the house and peered through a window. They were sure that there was something secret about the



hut, which Wanyan Kang kept to himself. Then they heard something they did not expect when he called out, "Mother!"

A woman's voice answered him and Wanyan Kang walked into the room. Huang Rong and Guo Jing saw a middle-aged woman sitting beside a table, gazing blankly into space. The woman looked no more than forty, had very delicate features with little powder on her face and wore very common robes. Huang Rong thought, "This princess is indeed prettier than Miss Mu, but why does she dress so shabbily and live in a hut like this? Has she fallen out of Prince Zhao's favor?"

Guo Jing thought the same thing at first but later regarded it as nothing special. He mused, "She must be like Rong'er. She purposely dresses like a peasant just for fun."

Wanyan Kang walked to her side took her arm and said, "Mother, are you ill again?"

The woman sighed, "I was worrying about you."

Wanyan Kang leaned on her and giggled, "But your son is standing healthy in front of you."

The woman replied, "With swollen eyes and a broken nose? You call that healthy? You are getting more and more disobedient. It's alright if your father knows, but if your teacher learns about it, you'll be in hot soup."

Wanyan Kang giggled again, "Mother, do you know who the Taoist priest is that came today?"

The woman asked, "Who?"

Wanyan Kang replied, "He is my teacher's martial brother and is my elder. I purposely pretended to be ignorant of that fact and called him Taoist this, Taoist that. He scowled

and was furious but couldn't do anything." With that, he started laughing.

The woman was alarmed and said, "Oh no! I've seen your teacher flare up before and he can kill people. It's really a frightening thought."

Wanyan Kang was curious and asked, "You've seen teacher kill before? When? Why did he kill people?"

The woman lifted her head and gazed at the lamp, as if she was somewhere far away and said gently, "That was a long time ago. Ah, I cannot remember anymore!"

Wanyan Kang did not probe further; instead he grinned smugly and said, "That Taoist Wang came to ask me how was I going to deal with the marriage and I told him that if he brought Miss Mu to me, I would listen to whatever he said."

The woman asked, "Have you asked your father's permission? Has he agreed?"

Wanyan Kang smiled, "Mother, you are too honest. I asked my men to trick them into coming here and locked them up in the back cell earlier. How can Taoist Wang find them now?" Wanyan Kang was going through the events in an excited manner while Guo Jing fumed outside.

Guo Jing thought, "To think that I actually thought that he had good intentions! Luckily Hero Mu was wise enough not to fall into his trap."

The woman answered exasperatedly, "How can you make fun of this man and his daughter and lock them up? Hurry up and release them now. Remember to apologize and give them some money."

Guo Jing nodded his head and thought, "That's more like it."

Wanyan Kang said, "Mother, you don't understand! These people don't care about money. If I release them and they go round telling people what happened, father will hear about it."

The woman became anxious, "Do you plan to lock them up forever?"

Wanyan Kang smiled, "I tried to sweet talk them into going back to their village and stupidly wait for me forever." With that, he burst out laughing.

Guo Jing was shaking with fury by this time; he raised a palm towards the window frame and was about to yell when he felt a soft and smooth hand cover his mouth and grab his left wrist. A gentle voice whispered into his ear, "Calm down." Guo Jing recovered and turned towards Huang Rong with a faint smile before looking back into the room again.

Wanyan Kang continued, "That Mu fellow is really cunning; he didn't take the bait. Let's see how long he can last if I keep him locked up for a couple of days longer."

His mother replied, "I've seen Miss Mu and I find her beautiful and talented. She is quite likeable. Why don't I talk to your father and ask him to let you marry her; then everything will be solved."

Wanyan Kang laughed, "Mother, for the last time, we are royalty. How can I marry a commoner? Father always tells me that he will arrange a respectable match for me. But it's a pity that we are Wanyans."

The woman asked, "Why?"

Wanyan Kang replied, "If not, I could marry the princess and become the crown prince."

The woman sighed and said in a low voice, "How can you look down on poor commoners...do you really think that..."

Wanyan Kang laughed, "Mother, I have a joke for you. That Mu fellow says that he will only believe me if he meets with and discusses it with you."

The woman responded, "I won't help you to lie and do such despicable things."

Wanyan Kang giggled and walked around in circles. He said, "Even if you were willing to do so, I will not allow it. You don't know how to lie and will be exposed on the spot."

Huang Rong and Guo Jing studied the room, which was furnished with normal wooden furniture and normal farming tools. On the wall hung a moldy sphere, a broken plough and an old wooden cart was placed in the corner of the room. Both of them thought, "This woman is a princess. Why is her house so plainly furnished?"

Wanyan Kang pressed his chest and the rabbit in his pocket let out a squeal. The woman asked, "What's that?"

Wanyan Kang replied, "Ah, I almost forgot. I saw an injured rabbit just now and picked it up. Mother, please tend to it." He took out a little white rabbit and placed it on the table. The rabbit's hind legs were broken and it couldn't move.

The woman said, "Good child!" She hurriedly took out some implements and medicine and tended to the rabbit's injuries.

Guo Jing began to fume again and thought, "This man purposely injured the rabbit because he knows that his mother is kind-hearted and will tend to its injuries. Then

she'll forget about the bad stuff that he has done. How can he be so evil as to make use of his mother's kind nature to deceive her?"

Huang Rong was leaning on him and felt Guo Jing's whole body quiver. She knew that he must be burning with anger and was afraid that he wouldn't be able to control it and burst out at Wanyan Kang. She pulled his hand and said, "Let's ignore them; come, let's go and find the medicine."

Guo Jing asked, "You know where they've hidden the medicine?"

Huang Rong shook her head and said, "No. So we have to go and find out."

Guo Jing thought about how huge the Zhao residence was and wondered where to start the 'finding', "It will be disastrous if we alert Shao Tongtian and the rest..." he was about to discuss this with Huang Rong when there was a flash of light in front of them. A man came carrying a small lantern while humming a tune and he was walking closer and closer to them. Guo Jing was about to slip behind a tree when Huang Rong rushed forward, towards the man. The man was alarmed and before he could say anything, Huang Rong flipped her palm and shot out a shiny steel object which pierced his throat. She asked, "Who are you?"

The man, having had the fright of his life, only managed to answer after awhile, "I...I am the caretaker. What...what are you doing?"

Huang Rong answered, "What am I doing? I am going to kill you! You are the caretaker? That's good. Where do you keep the medicines that your young prince had people buy during the day?"

The caretaker replied, "I...I don't know. The young prince kept it himself!"

Huang Rong used her left hand to twist his wrist and used her right hand to push forward slightly, causing the steel object to pierce even deeper into his throat. The caretaker felt a sharp pain shoot through his wrist but didn't dare scream out loud. Huang Rong said in a low voice, "Are you going to tell me or not?"

The caretaker responded, "I really don't know."

Huang Rong used her right hand to remove his cap and stuff it into his mouth. Following that, her left hand pulled and twisted his arm. A 'crack' was heard as she broke the bone in his right shoulder. The caretaker tried to yell before fainting but the cap in his mouth had muffled his yell. Guo Jing was stunned. He didn't expect this petite young lady to be so vicious and cruel in her actions. Huang Rong shook the caretaker and he came around. She swiftly removed the cap from his mouth and placed it back on his head before saying, "Do you want me to break your left shoulder as well?"

The caretaker wept in pain and answered weakly, "I really don't know. Even if Miss kills me, I still won't know."

Now Huang Rong believed him; she lowered her voice and said, "Go and find young prince now and tell him that you fell and broke your shoulder. Also tell him that you suffered serious internal injuries and the physician says that you must take the medicine that he bought up earlier. Beg him to give you some of the medicine." The caretaker listened attentively to Huang Rong's instructions and dared not question anything.

Huang Rong continued, "Hurry up, young prince is with the princess. I am going to follow you and if I see that you do

not act properly, I will break your neck and dig out your eyes." With that, she stretched out her fingers and made a clawing move at his eyes. The caretaker shivered and stood up; he clenched his teeth, ignored the dreadful pain and dashed towards the princess's house.

Wanyan Kang was still talking with his mother when the caretaker suddenly dashed in, sweating and crying. He repeated what Huang Rong instructed him to say. The princess saw that his face was as white as a sheet and knew he was in great pain; she didn't wait for Wanyan Kang's answer and immediately ordered him to give the caretaker the medicine. Wanyan Kang frowned and said, "The medicine is with Master Liang, go and find him yourself."

The caretaker wept and said, "Young prince, please write a note for me." The princess immediately took out some paper, ink and a brush and Wanyan Kang wrote the note. The caretaker bowed and thanked them while the princess said gently, "Hurry and take the medicine to cure your injuries."

The caretaker came out of the house and walked a few steps when he felt the cold blade of a knife on the skin of his neck. He heard Huang Rong say, "Go to Master Liang now." The caretaker walked a little ways but he could stand the pain no longer and fell to the ground.

Huang Rong said, "If you don't get the medicine, your neck will be broken." With that, she grabbed his head and turned it forcefully. The caretaker was shocked and had a sudden wave of determination. Sweating continuously, he hurried on. They passed by seven or eight servants but no one asked anything when they saw Guo Jing and Huang Rong.

When they reached Liang Ziwong's quarters, they found the door locked. A servant told them that he had gone to

the Fragrant Snow guest hall. Guo Jing saw that the caretaker was having difficulty walking and helped him along. Just as they reached the guest hall, two guards carrying lanterns in one hand and sabers in the other called, "Stop, who's there?"

The caretaker took out the note written by Wanyan Kang and gave it to the guards. They glanced at it and let him through before going up to question Guo Jing and Huang Rong. The caretaker said, "They're our own people."

One of the guards said, "The prince is having a banquet with important guests, no one is allowed to disturb them. If you have anything to say, you can come back tomorrow to..." he didn't finish his sentence before the two guards felt their strength disappear. They were unable to move because Huang Rong had sealed their accupoints. She hid them in some bushes before grabbing Guo Jing's hand and they made their way towards the entrance of the hall. She gently pushed the caretaker forward. She and Guo Jing swung up and caught a wooden window frame and peered inside the hall.

The hall was brightly lit with a huge banquet table in the middle. Guo Jing looked at the people sitting around the table and his heart beat furiously. He has seen the same people in the same room earlier. There was the Junior Chief of White Camel Mountain, Ouyang Ke, the 'Dragon King of the Demonic Group', Sha Tongtian, his martial brother the 'Three-Headed Dragon', Hou Tonghai, the 'Ginseng Immortal', Liang Ziwong and the 'Butcher of One Thousand Hands', Peng Lianhu. At the head of the banquet table was the Jin sixth prince, Wanyan Honglie. At one corner of the table was a thickly padded grand chair in which sat 'Superior Virtue' Lingzhi, who had a golden complexion and looked seriously injured. Guo Jing laughed gleefully, "You



ambushed Taoist Wang, so it serves you right to have a taste of your own medicine."

The caretaker entered the room and bowed in front of Liang Ziwing before handing him the note written by Wanyan Kang. Liang Ziwing read the note, glanced at the caretaker and handed the note to Wanyan Honglie, "Esteemed Prince, was this written by the young prince?"

Wanyan Honglie read through the note and said, "Yes, please do what it says Master Liang."

Liang Ziwing turned and instructed a dwarf dressed in green, "Go and take out five grams each of the medicines that the young prince delivered today and give it to the caretaker." The dwarf nodded and followed the caretaker out.

Guo Jing whispered to Huang Rong, "Let's go, these people here are too formidable."

Huang Rong smiled and shook her head. A strand of Huang Rong's soft hair brushed past Guo Jing's face and he felt a tickling sensation not only on his face but also in his heart. He didn't argue with her and dropped down. Huang Rong hurriedly grabbed his wrist, flung her body forward, locked her legs around a high wooden pole and gently lowered Guo Jing to the ground.

Guo Jing was relieved, "That was close! Had I just jumped down, wouldn't it have alerted the high level fighters inside?" Guo Jing was not a veteran Jianghu traveler and tended to be careless at times.

The caretaker and the dwarf came out and Guo Jing followed behind them. He walked ten steps before turning around and saw that Huang Rong had flipped up and was peering into the hall with her legs hooked on the roof's

edge and her head hanging below. There was a light breeze, causing her white robe to float gently; the image looked like a blooming white lily in the darkness. Huang Rong glanced into the hall and saw that no one had noticed her presence; she turned her head and watched until Guo Jing's figure disappeared into the darkness before turning her attention back to what was going on in the hall.

Peng Lianhu suddenly turned around, and with eyes quick as lightning, he did a check of the windows. Huang Rong didn't dare look any longer, and crouched near the window to hear what was going on. She heard a rasping voice say, "Do you people think that Wang Chuyi turned up coincidentally or was it for a reason?"

A high pitched voice replied, "No matter whether he had ill intentions or not, being injured by 'Superior Virtue' Lingzhi will leave him dead, or at least crippled."

Huang Rong glanced into the hall and saw that the person talking was Peng Lianhu, who was small and had eyes that flashed like lightning. She heard a clear voice laugh, "We have even heard of the 'Seven Masters of Quanzhen' in Tibet. They really live up to their name; if it were not for 'Superior Virtue' Lingzhi's attack, we would have been defeated by him."

A deep and rough voice answered, "Master Ouyang, you don't have to flatter me, both that Taoist priest and I are injured, there is no winner."

Ouyang Ke said, "Yes, but you just have to recuperate quietly for some time whereas even if he doesn't die, he will end up handicapped!"

After this comment no one spoke. The host could then be heard toasting all the assembled guests. Guest by guest he said "Sir, you have come from a great distance to visit me, I

am deeply honored! It reflects greatly on the Jin nation to have such honored guests as you!" Huang Rong thought that the person speaking must be the Prince Zhao, Wanyan Honglie. The assembled guests then all answered with the modest protestations as decorum required.

Wanyan Honglie then continued, "Lingzhi is Tibet's foremost monk, Liang is a master of great learning and integrity, Chief Ouyang is a legendary leader of military virtue, Master Peng's prestige is widely feared on the central plains, and Formidable Sha rules over Yellow River! If any one among the five heroes lends a hand, the Jin Nation's challenges could be overcome; but imagine what could be achieved with all five of you united together! Ha... Ha! That would be akin to having a lion using all its strength to catch a rabbit!" This speech made him sound very arrogant indeed.

Liang Ziwing smiled and said, "If Your Lordship has a task for us to carry out, you need only say it and we will gladly do it. Unfortunately this old man's (referring to himself) kung fu is very shabby and weak. I fear that if I was to be entrusted with such a task by your Lordship I would fail and not be able to show my worthless face again, ha...ha!" Peng Lianhu also added a few self depreciating remarks in the same vein. These men have always been the center of attention and power in their own regions. Their speech and manner showed that they did not consider themselves inferior to Wanyan Honglie.

Wanyan Honglie again toasted each guest in turn with a cup of wine "This humble prince is deeply moved by your presence here tonight. I will now speak of a great matter. This matter cannot be mentioned to any other person outside of this room. If word got out, it would cause great trouble for my Jin nation. This humble prince has great confidence in your ability to keep this secret."

These words, although humbly spoken, implied great importance and caused everyone present to take note that this must be a very serious matter that required the utmost secrecy. Everyone therefore replied, "Your Lordship need not fear, no words spoken here tonight will be heard outside this room!" The five invited guests knew that the reason for their invitation must be a matter of great importance; something that would require no small measures to carry out. Having spared no expense at sending them presents of gold, silver and other valuables, Wanyan Honglie still had not made any mention of the task he would ask of them. Now that he was about to reveal this deeply held secret, there was not a person present who didn't feel extremely interested and excited.

Wanyan Honglie continued: "During the reign of the Great Jin Emperor Taizong, in the third year of the Tianhui era [the seventh year of the Song Emperor Huizong's Xuanhe era], our Jin soldiers, led by the generals Youzhanmeihe and Wolibu, captured the two Song Emperors, Huizong and Qinzong. From ancient times there has never been such a great victory." All the guests cheered his speech.

Huang Rong thought to herself angrily, "How shameless! Everyone, aside from that Tibetan Monk, is Chinese. The Jin Prince is boasting about how his country invaded our country and held our two emperors captive and you actually cheer him on!"

She heard Wanyan Honglie speak again, "At that time, our Great Jin soldiers were vigorous and their numbers vast, but now, after almost a hundred years, the Zhao officials serve our emperor from Huangzhou. Esteemed guests, can you guess why they serve from there?"

Liang Ziwing said "Please enlighten us Honored Prince."

Wanyan Honglie sighed “The year Yue Fei defeated us and had us in his grasp, there was no one who did not know it, but who would dare say it out loud? Our Jin Generals knew how to lead soldiers, but when they encountered Yue Fei they were always defeated. Even after Qin Gui ordered Yue Fei's execution, our soldiers were still demoralized by their earlier defeats so that they lacked the willpower to act further against the Southern Song. Although this humble prince has the ambition to act, he lacks the abilities to succeed. If my guests, with their god-like skills, were to help with this enterprise, then there is no way that we cannot succeed and earn great merit.”

The guests looked at each other without fully understanding exactly what he meant. Each thought: “Charging enemies and fighting valiantly, taking cities and seizing territory... these are not my strengths. Could it be that he wants us to assassinate some Southern Song generals?

Wanyan Honglie's face showed self importance [de yi]. His voice trembled slightly, “A couple of months ago, this humble prince was looking through some old files in the palace when I stumbled across a letter left behind by the former emperor. It was actually a few lines written by Yue Fei, the phrasing of which was most peculiar. I puzzled over this for a few months until at long last I figured out its hidden meaning. It turns out that when Yue Fei was languishing in prison he realized that he had no hope of leaving with his life. His loyalty towards his country was so great that he wrote down his entire life's learning regarding battle tactics and other secret military arts in this letter in the hope that it could be passed on to other loyal countrymen who could use them in defending China against the Jin invaders. Luckily Qin Gui was very clever and feared that Yue Fei would try to communicate with

people outside of the prison, so he was very careful to prepare against such an event. Every guard assigned to watch over Yue Fei was personally selected by Qin Gui and was known to be completely trustworthy and loyal to him (Qin Gui). If the soldiers formerly under Yue Fei were to get word from Yue Fei and rise up in rebellion against the court, who could stop them? At that time, the only reason that there was not such a rebellion was entirely due to Yue Fei not being willing to rebel against his emperor. Had he changed his mind and decided to do so he would have certainly succeeded. What Qin Gui did not know though was that Yue Fei didn't have any desire to save his own life, only to save the 'rivers and mountains' [jiang shan...literally the country] of the Song Empire. Fortunately this letter never left the palace even after his execution." Everyone was listening intently to this story, so intently that they forgot to drink their wine. Huang Rong, hanging outside the window, was also listening mesmerized.

Wanyan Honglie continued: "Yue Fei had no alternative but to secrete his military manual in his clothing. Then he wrote four poems entitled 'Buddhist Barbarian' [Pu Sa Man], 'Shameful Slave' [chou nu er], 'Congratulating the Imperial Court Sage' [He Sheng Zhao], and 'Level Heaven Music' [Qi Tian Yue]. Each piece of writing appeared to be nonsense. The style did not follow the proper rules and the tonal sequences were all wrong. The sentences were jumbled to the point of incoherence. Qin Gui, who was said to have wisdom and talent the size of the oceans, was not able to figure out what hidden meanings lay in these pieces, so he dispatched some men with these letters to the Jin. Many years later these four pieces of nonsense writing found their way into the secret files of the Jin palace. No one was able to comprehend the meaning of these letters. Everyone thought that Yue Fei, who was near execution at the time he wrote these letters, was venting to his anger and

frustrations by writing such disjointed and senseless verse. Nobody guessed that the apparent nonsense verse was in fact a riddle hiding a very great secret!"

"This humble prince though continued to work on these letters until I finally discovered their secret. It turned out, that if you took every third word in a piece and put them together, and then reversed the order, a hidden message was revealed. In these four letters Yue Fei instructed his successors in the arts of military strategy and to continuously attack along the Yellow River and wipe out our Jin armies. In spite of his diligent work for his emperor, it turned out to be in vain. Ha...ha!" The guests gasped in surprise, then, one after another, began praising Wanyan Honglie's intelligence for cracking such a difficult code.

Wanyan Honglie said "Yue Fei's military abilities were unparalleled; when he attacked there was no one more formidable or successful. Imagine if we were to have his book of secret military strategies, then the whole empire would be ours for the taking!"

Wanyan Honglie went on "This humble prince thinks that this great book must be with Yue Fei in his tomb." At this point he paused. Everyone suddenly realized what was being asked: "Prince Zhao invited us here to do a bit of grave robbing!"

He continued, "Honored Guests, you are all brave heroes and by now you must be wondering how I could be asking you to rob a tomb? Although Yue Fei was the Jin's sworn enemy, his spirit and loyalty is something that is world renowned; we can't possibly disturb his resting place. This humble prince searched through the historical reports by spies of the Southern Song to look for further clues. It turned out that the day Yue Fei died he was buried beside the Zhongan Bridge. Later, Emperor Xiao Zong moved his

body to Lin'an's West Lake [Xi Hu] to a temple he had built for him. His clothing and other personal belongings were placed somewhere else and this must be where his book is. This other place is also in Lin'an." As he spoke this last sentence he watched his guests intently. Everyone was waiting for him to reveal the exact location of the book.

However, Wanyan Honglie suddenly changed the topic: "This humble prince had another thought; since someone moved Yue Fei's belongings, I feared that the book must have been taken by them as well. After some very detailed research I now know that this could not be possible. The people of Song venerate Yue Fei so much that they would not have dared interfere with his belongings. We are certain to find the book at this place. However, in the south there are many martial people of high abilities. If we are to succeed we cannot allow the slightest word of this to get out or else some of them may try to search for the book themselves. That would cause no end of trouble! This task concerns the fate of two nations and it is not something I would lightly undertake unless I had the help of the greatest heroes of the Wulin world." Everyone nodded their heads.

Wanyan Honglie then said, "The location of this book is no small matter and is indeed difficult to speak of; but in the presence of people of such great ability it is easier to speak. The location of the book is..." At this point the door to the hall was suddenly pushed open and a man rushed in, his face swollen and pale. He rushed forward to Liang Ziwing and called out, "Master..." everyone recognized him as the dwarf dressed in green that Liang Ziwing had sent to fetch the medicines.



When Guo Jing went with the caretaker and dwarf to fetch the medicine, he used his left hand to support the caretaker and help him walk, but also to ensure the caretaker would not try to warn the dwarf in any way about Guo Jing. The three of them went through a long corridor and past some rooms before arriving at Liang Ziwong's storeroom. The dwarf lit a candle, opened the door and entered.

Guo Jing stood close to the room where he smelled the pungent scent of various medicinal herbs. He also saw that a table, couch, floor and everywhere else was covered with all types of dried herbs. There were bottles, big and small, jars, bowls, vats and so forth. It seems that even though Liang Ziwong was a guest here, he still couldn't help but play around with different medicinal herbs trying to concoct different drugs. The dwarf seemed to be well versed in the nature of herbs as well and he quickly selected portions of four different herbs and wrapped them up in separate packets of white paper which he gave to the caretaker.

Guo Jing reached out and took the packets before turning and leaving the room. Now that he had the medicine in his hands, he didn't pay any more attention to the caretaker. Unfortunately for him, the caretaker was a slippery fellow. When Guo Jing and the dwarf left, he deliberately hung back, waiting until they were past the door. Then he suddenly slammed the door shut, grabbed the door bolt and locked the door, shouting "Robber, Thief!" Shocked, Guo Jing immediately turned to try and push open the door only to find that it wouldn't budge, the door stood firm. The dwarf, although he was small, was by no means slow witted. He immediately sized up the situation and took advantage of Guo Jing's distraction. He quickly snatched the four medicine packets out of his hand and threw them into the pond beside the room. Guo Jing tried to hit the dwarf with

his fists, but the dwarf was too quick and managed to slip away.

Guo Jing, even more frantic and angry, placed both his palms against the door and used his internal energy to break it open. There was a loud crack as the door bolt snapped and the door flew open. Guo Jing rushed in and silenced the caretaker immediately by smashing the caretaker's jaw with one swing of his fist. Luckily for Guo Jing, Liang Ziwong did not like to be disturbed, so his room was located in an out of the way place in the palace compound. Being far from other buildings, the caretaker's screams had not alerted anyone. He rushed back out of the room and saw that the dwarf was already a long way off. Guo Jing sprinted after him and in no time at all caught up with the dwarf and grabbed him by the neck. The dwarf, when he heard Guo Jing behind him, tried to use his leg to sweep Guo Jing off his feet. The dwarf was no stranger to fighting, having encountered many rough types in his travels with Liang Ziwong, so his skills were not weak. Guo Jing knew that he was in danger of not only failing to get the medicine for Wang Chuyi, but also, if the alarm was raised, Huang Rong would be in mortal danger if she was caught. Since there was no time to lose he made use of his most vicious moves such as the 'Disconnect the Muscles and Separate the Bones' move taught him by one of the Seven Freaks of Jiangnan.

Guo Jing soon had the dwarf unconscious and he hastily hid him in some bushes beside the path. He then hurried back to the medicine store room and lit a candle which revealed the caretaker still lying unconscious on the floor.

Guo Jing cursed himself silently for being so careless. "Which four jars did the dwarf select the medicine from? I wasn't paying attention and now I have no idea of which herbs he used." All the jars were marked with strange signs

but no words. He thought hard: "I remember he was standing here so maybe I should just grab a little from each jar around here and bring them all back to Wang Chuyi to select from." He hurriedly snatched a pile of paper and began grabbing a handful of each type of herb/medicines which he then wrapped up into several packets all the while worried that someone had heard the caretaker's shouts earlier.

As soon as he had packed up all the medicines he felt much relieved. As he turned to leave, his elbow accidentally knocked over a large bamboo basket which fell onto its side. As soon as the lid came off there was a sudden hiss and a huge blood red snake shot out of the basket straight towards his face.

Guo Jing was startled and jumped back. He saw the snake was still partly coiled in the basket so he wasn't sure how long it was. Its head waved back and forth as its forked tongue flickered at him. Mongolia has a cold climate and all the snakes that he had seen there were small. This blood red snake certainly didn't look like any snake he'd seen before. He felt terrified as he slowly stepped back until he bumped into the table knocking the candle over. In an instant the candle went out and the room was plunged into total darkness.

With the medicine in hand he quickly rushed towards the door. Just as he reached it he felt something loop around his leg as if someone was wrapping a thick rope around it very tightly. Without time to think he tried to jump up. However the thing wouldn't let go and then he felt a cold sensation on his right arm and found that he could no longer move it.

Guo Jing knew that the snake had wrapped around him so he used his left arm to feel around his waste for the knife that Temujin had given him long ago. The sudden stench of

a pungent medicine like smell assailed his nostrils and he felt something cold on his face. It was the snake's tongue flicking on his cheek. By then there was no time to find his knife so he grabbed the snake firmly by its neck. The snake was incredibly powerful and began to squeeze tighter and its head moved closer to his face...

Guo Jing tried to hold the snake back but his arm was becoming numb and it became difficult to breathe as the snake tightened its grip around his chest. When he tried to use his internal energy to loosen the snake's grip it did give him slight relief, before the snake resumed its crushing grip. Guo Jing's left arm was beginning to lose strength. The stench of the snake's breath was unbearable and made him feel nauseous. He knew that he would not be able to hold off the snake for much longer. Eventually he might lose consciousness, loosen his grip, and then the snake would finish him.

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When the dwarf, knocked unconscious by Guo Jing, eventually came around his first thought was, "Where is that guy?" He looked over to his masters store room but saw it was dark and silent. He assumed Guo Jing had already fled. He rushed back towards the 'Fragrant Snow Hall' to report to his master Liang Ziwing.

Huang Rong was shocked when she heard the dwarf's report. She executed the move 'Goose Lands on Flat Sand' to quietly drop to the ground. When the guests in the hall were listening to Wanyan Honglie's story no one paid any attention to what was going outside. However, as soon as they were interrupted by the dwarf's news this was no longer the case. In a room full of people with high martial arts abilities who were no longer distracted, would any of them fail to notice Huang Rong's almost silent move

outside? Liang Ziwing was the first to move. In a flash he was outside and standing in front of Huang Rong, blocking her path. "Who are you?" he demanded.

Huang Rong could see by the way Liang Ziwing moved that his ability exceeded hers. Considering that there was a room full of highly skilled martial artists this was no time to start a fight, so she simply smiled and said sweetly, "This plum tree has such beautiful blossoms, could you please break a twig off for me?"

Liang Ziwing didn't expect to see such a beautiful young woman standing outside dressed in splendid clothing. When he heard her delicate laugh, 'like pearls tinkling on jade', he couldn't help being surprised. He thought that she must be a palace lady, possibly the lady Qian Jin, so he immediately broke off a twig of plum blossoms to give to her.

Huang Rong smiled and received the blossoms saying "Thank you kind sir."

By this time, the rest of the guests were standing by the door watching the proceedings. Peng Lianhu turned to Wanyan Honglie and asked, "Sire, is this lady from the palace?" Wanyan Honglie shook his head and said, "No."

Peng Lianhu went over and stood in front of Huang Rong blocking her way, saying, "Please wait for a moment lady. Let me also break off some blossoms for you." His right hand moved to execute a holding lock, grabbing her wrist, extending his five fingers towards her side, then suddenly flipping his hand into a claw and striking at her throat!

Huang Rong initially intended to pretend to be a simple lady with no martial abilities and not that bright so as to play for time and find a way to escape. She didn't expect that Peng Lianhu not only had great martial abilities but that he was very sharp and saw right through her

deception. His blow was so strong that she had no alternative but to dodge, raise her right hand in a sweep, thumb touching index finger, the remaining fingers outstretched, like an orchid shooting out. Her execution of this move was not only of the highest skill but also exquisitely beautiful.

Peng Lianhu knew that if she landed her strike on his 'Corner Pool' accupoint then his whole arm would become numb and useless, so he was suddenly forced to change his strike to avoid her counter strike. He was shocked that not only did this very young lady have outstanding skills and speed, but she also knew accupoint kung fu. Although he had seen many types of kung fu in his time, he had never seen this 'Orchid Touch' accupoint style before.

The 'Orchid' style relies upon speed, accuracy, surprise and purity. Of these, purity was the most important. It requires graceful execution and an easy, relaxed manner to execute properly, as if the person using it had not a care in the world. If it was executed with too much urgency or viciousness then it would lose its advantage in a fight.

As Huang Rong executed the 'Orchid' style everyone else watched in astonishment. Peng Lianhu laughed, "Little girl, what is your good name please? Who is your honorable master?"

Huang Rong smiled and replied, "This sprig of plum blossoms is quite pretty is it not? I must go and put it into a vase!" She didn't answer Peng Lianhu at all. Everyone else looked at her suspiciously wondering where on earth she came from.

Hou Tonghai said sternly, "Elder Peng asked your name. What's the matter, didn't you hear?"

Huang Rong asked innocently, "He asked something?"

Peng Lianhu had actually seen Huang Rong earlier in the day, in disguise, making fun of Hou Tonghai; seeing her here now, acting so impertinently, he suddenly thought, "That filthy beggar boy was actually you in disguise!" Suppressing a laugh he said, "Old Hou, don't you recognize who that girl is?"

Hou Tonghai was shocked. He looked Huang Rong over a couple of times while Peng Lianhu said, "You were chasing someone around in circles all day today, how could you forget?"

Hou Tonghai looked blankly at Huang Rong until at last he recognized her, "Yeah, that filthy boy!" When he was chasing Huang Rong, he never stopped cursing her as 'Filthy boy'. Even though 'he' had now become a 'she' he couldn't help but curse her as before. He raised both fists and charged at her only to grab air as Huang Rong deftly dodged aside.

The 'Dragon King of the Demonic Group' Sha Tongtian's body became a blur as he moved forward and clasped Huang Rong's right wrist calling out "Where are you running to?"

Huang Rong's left hand shot up and struck at his eyes with two fingers, but Sha Tongtian was too fast and grabbed her left wrist as well. Huang Rong struggled to free herself, but try as she might she was not able to. Instead she shouted, "Shameless!"

Sha Tongtian asked, "What's shameless?"

"Big men bullying a girl and trying to take advantage of her!" she replied indignantly.

Sha Tongtian was surprised at this comment. He was after all a famous elder martial artist and this did appear to be a

case of the strong bullying the weak. He relaxed his grip and said, "Go into the hall and we will talk." Huang Rong saw she had no alternative but to enter the Hall.

"Before we do any talking let me cut this filthy tyke down to size first!" Hou Tonghai angrily demanded as he raised his fists to strike.

Peng Lianhu stopped him, cautioning, "First we need to find out who her Shifu is and what school she belongs to." He could tell from her fighting style and appearance that she must be from a great school. It would be better to find out who she was before doing anything too hasty. Hou Tonghai didn't pay any attention to him and launched an attack at Huang Rong.

She stepped aside and responded, "So you really want to fight eh?"

"You're not going to get away", Hou Tonghai retorted. He was afraid that if she did get away he would never be able to catch her again.

"If you want to have a little competition with me, that's not a problem." she said as she took up a full wine bowl from the table and placed it on her head. She then grabbed another full wine bowl in each hand and continued, "Do you dare to take up this challenge?"

Hou Tonghai was suspicious, "What kind of mischief is this?"

Huang Rong looked around at the assembled guests and smiled as she said, "This big-horned uncle and I have no deep grievance. If I am able to defeat him, what happens then?"



Hou Tonghai angrily stepped forward and yelled, "You defeat me? Listen you smelly little brat, this is a carbuncle not a horn. Take a good look and stop spouting crap!"

Huang Rong didn't pay any attention to him and continued addressing the others. "Let him and I compete with three full bowls of wine each. Who ever is the first to spill a drop will be considered the loser, is that fair enough?" She had seen Liang Ziwing, Peng Lianhu and Sha Tongtian in action and knew that she would be no match for any of them in a fight. However if this three horned dragon, with more teasing, can be enticed to fight using lightness skills and quick wits she will have the advantage. If you were to compare true martial ability she may not be his equal but she thought, "Right now my only chance is to play the fool and hope they don't find me a threat and let me go."

Hou Tonghai yelled, "Who wants to play monkey tricks with you!" and with that he launched another fierce attack.

Huang Rong again dodged still holding the wine and laughed, "Ok! I'll hold the three bowls of wine and you can attack without any bowls. Let's compete!"

Hou Tonghai was more than twice as old as she. Although his name was not as famous as that of his martial brother Sha Tongtian, he was still a fairly respected member of the martial arts world. To receive such a taunt in front of his peers was enough to make him even angrier. Without further thought he grabbed three bowls of wine, placing one on his head and the others in his hands. He bent his left leg and sent a vicious kick towards Huang Rong with his right.

Huang Rong laughed, "Well done! This shows the talents of a true hero." She then began to display her 'Lightness' qing gong by moving all around the room. Hou Tonghai launched

a series of kicks at her but she was able to avoid them all. Everyone began to roar with laughter seeing such a ridiculous fight.

Huang Rong kept her upper body completely steady as she glided about the room. Lumbering behind her, taking large steps was Hou Tonghai. She began spinning as she moved, her skirt forming a circle, as she alternated between dodging and attacking. She tried to use her elbows to knock over one of Hou Tonghai's wine bowls; however he was always able to avoid her attacks.

Liang Ziwing thought to himself, "This girl's kung fu is certainly considerable; but all things considered, she is still no match for brother Hou. However who wins and who loses is of no concern to me." His main concern was for the treasured medicinal herbs in his storeroom, so he turned and headed out the door to find the thief.

He thought, "The four medicines listed on the prescription, 'Dragon's Blood', 'Pseudo Ginseng', 'Bear Gallbladder' and 'Myrrh' are the same as those the Prince ordered to be bought up. Those herbs are nothing special and not very expensive, so their loss is minimal; but what does concern me is what else he may have taken while he was in there.

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Guo Jing was beginning to lose consciousness as the snake squeezed tighter and tighter. From the smell and the feel of the snake's breath on his face he knew its head must be getting closer. If the snake was able to bite him he would surely die. The snake's body was already brushing against his mouth. His body was immobile, held fast in the snake's deadly vice-like grip. His left hand, which was desperately trying to hold back the snake, was growing weaker. The

only thing that he could move was his head and mouth; so he opened his mouth and bit hard into the snake's neck.

The snake began to writhe and squeeze even tighter as it felt pain from Guo Jing's teeth. Guo Jing felt a gush of snake blood flow into his mouth. It tasted extremely bitter and was hard to bear. He didn't know if it was poisonous or not but he was too afraid to let go and spit it out. He feared that he might not get a second chance to bite the snake again so he had no option but to swallow. He also thought that the more blood the snake lost the more strength it would also lose and would eventually loosen its grip. He redoubled his efforts to suck out the snake's blood and continued to swallow. After continuing this for a while his stomach became full and the snake did gradually begin to loosen its grip. Finally, after a few spasms, the snake loosened its grip entirely and moved no more.

Guo Jing was by now exhausted and had to lean heavily against the table to remain upright. His first thought was to flee; however both his legs were still numb from the lack of blood flow so he was forced to wait for the circulation to reach all of his limbs again. After a few minutes he felt his body getting hotter as if he was burning up. He was very worried but after a short while he found that he could move again. However the feeling of extreme heat still coursed through his body. When he pressed the back of his hand against his cheek it felt burning hot.

The packets of medicine were still safely in his coat. "Now that I have the medicine I can help Wang Chuyi. Mu Yi and his daughter, though innocent of any wrong doing, were locked up by Wanyan Kang and are likely to be killed. I must help them escape before I leave." With this thought he left the storeroom and, after looking for the right direction, headed off to the prison where Mu Yi and his daughter were being held.

When he arrived at the prison he saw a group of guards patrolling and keeping a close watch. Guo Jing waited a time but found no way to get in as they had the first time. He went around to the back of the building and waited for a guard patrol to go past. Then he leaped lightly onto the roof of the building wall, then quietly into the courtyard within. Leaning against a wall he listened for the presence of soldiers. When he was sure that the coast was clear he whispered quietly "Elder Mu, I've come to help you get out of here."

Mu Yi was shocked. "Kind Sir, who are you?" he asked.

Guo Jing replied, "Junior's name is Guo Jing."

Mu Yi vaguely heard the name Guo Jing, but after the events of the past day and being weak from injuries, it didn't register at first. Then the two words 'Guo Jing' hit his brain like a thunderclap. With a trembling voice he asked, "What? Guo Jing? Your...your...surname is Guo?"

Guo Jing replied, "Yes, junior is the one who fought with the young prince earlier today in front of the arena."

Mu Yi asked, "What is your father's name?"

"My late father's name was Xiaotian." When Guo Jing was young he didn't know his father's name. It was only later after Zhu Cong taught him to read that he was able to learn his father's name.

Mu Yi's eyes filled with tears. He raised his head and said softly, "Heaven, oh Heaven!" He reached his hands through the bars and tightly held Guo Jing's hand.

Guo Jing could feel Mu Yi's hands trembling and at the same time felt tears dropping onto his hand. He thought to

himself, "Elder Mu is very grateful that I've come to rescue them."

He quietly whispered, "I have a sharp knife which I am going to use to cut away the lock and then both of you can come out. Earlier I heard the young prince talking. I know he is trying to deceive you, please don't trust him!"

Mu Yi however asked, "Your mother...is her surname Li? Has she passed away or is she still alive?"

"Oh!" Guo Jing asked surprised, "How do you know my mother's surname? My mother is in Mongolia."

Mu Yi became even more excited when he heard this. He continued holding Guo Jing's hand.

Guo Jing said, "Let my hand go so that I can cut off the lock."

Mu Yi held Guo Jing's hand as if it were the most precious treasure in the world. He was afraid if he let it go he would lose Guo Jing so he continued to hold fast, sighing, "You...you have grown up into such a big man. Ai! I only have to close my eyes and I can see your father, now long departed from this world."

"You knew my father?"

"Your father was my sworn brother. We swore to help our fellow countrymen." At this point his throat became choked with emotion and he was unable to continue. When Guo Jing heard this, he found his eyes becoming moist with tears as well.

Mu Yi was in fact Yang Tiexin. During the battle with the government soldiers he suffered a deep spear wound in his back. He managed to cling to a horse and was carried for several li before he finally lost consciousness and fell off into

a clump of bushes. The next morning, when he awoke, he crawled to a nearby farmer's hut where he remained for over a month recovering. By then he could struggle out of bed with the aid of a walking stick. The village nearby was called Lotus Pond village and was only about fourteen to sixteen li [7-8 kilometers /4-5 miles] from his own Ox Village. Luckily the farmer's family was very kind and took care of him as he slowly recovered. However he was worried about his wife and wanted to go back and look for her in Ox Village. Since he was afraid that government soldiers might still be there searching for him, he waited until midnight before returning to his old house to look around.

When he arrived there he saw the door ajar which made him fear that the worst had happened. He pushed it open and walked in. He looked around and saw things were very much as they were the night that they had to flee. There were some half finished clothes that his wife, Bao Xiruo, had left lying on the bed. On the wall, where his two family spears usually hung, one was missing, probably taken by one of the soldiers that night. That left one, looking as if, like himself, it too had had lost its partner/wife. Apart from that, nothing else was disturbed and everything was covered by a thick layer of dust...

When he went over to his sworn brother's house, it too was much the same as the night they left. He thought about the old wine seller Qu San with his incredible martial arts skills and wondered if he might be able to help him find his sworn brother's family and his wife. However, when he went to the wine shop he found it was locked up and no one was there. Yang Tiexin (now disguised as Mu Yi) made inquiries amongst his acquaintances in Ox Village but they all said that after the soldiers had left there had been no news of Guo or Yang.

He went to Red Plum village to ask about his wife at his father-in-law's house only to find that his father-in-law had died of shock shortly after hearing the news of the soldiers attack. Yang Tiexin wanted to cry, but had no tears left to shed. Dejected, he returned to Lotus Pond village and the farmer's family who had cared for him.

However, as the saying goes, 'Troubles never visit in isolation'. An epidemic of plague had broken out and one by one the farmer's family was stricken. After only a few days six of them died leaving only a newborn baby girl alive. Yang Tiexin was duty bound to care for her so he made her his adopted daughter and took her with him on his quest to find Li Ping and Bao Xiruo. Since one was halfway to the northern steppe and the other already in the north what chance did he have of finding them?

Yang Tiexin didn't dare use his real name since he was a wanted man hunted by government soldiers. So he 'split' the character of his surname, 'Yang' in half and used the left side to form the new character 'Mu' for his assumed surname and the right half to form the character 'Yi' for his personal name.

[Translators Note: The character "Yang" is made up of the character "Mu" or wood and "Yang" for the sound. The whole character actually means Poplar Tree as well as being a surname. The "Mu" of his assumed name actually means solemn and has another part of a character on the right side. The "Yang" character is pronounced as "Yi" by itself and means "Change" as well as other meanings. This is coincidentally the same "Yi" as the "Yi Jing" or "I Ching" - classic of changes. I'm sure there are quite a few allusions in this simple name change from which those who know Chinese history and culture well could have hours of fun analyzing. Also it is a common fact that when a man is forced to alter his name he is reluctant to lose touch with

the original name, so the name Yang Tiexin choose is not in keeping with custom. Anyway - on with the story!]

After ten years of fruitless searching the 'Rivers and Lakes' region [Jianghu] his adopted daughter Mu Nianci had grown like a flower into a lovely young woman. Yang Tiexin thought that his wife had likely died at the hands of marauding soldiers by now. But he still held out the hope that heaven was not blind to the sufferings of man, and that Guo Xiaotian's wife had given birth to a son (Guo Jing) who was alive. As soon as Mu Nianci was of marriageable age he stuck his spear into the ground, erected a banner proclaiming a competition to win the hand of his daughter and waited with the hope that Guo Jing would one day come and win her hand in marriage, thus fulfilling his hope and pledge to become the father-in-law of his sworn brother's son.

Although many tried, no Guo Jing was among them; after the better part of a year, his hope of finding Guo Jing began to fade. Now he would have to be content to find any man of good character and martial ability to marry his adopted daughter. Then, suddenly, on this one day, they encountered embarrassment at the hands of Wanyan Kang, help from a heroic stranger and by nightfall to find out that the heroic stranger is none other than Guo Jing. How could he help but be overwhelmed with emotion?

Meanwhile, Mu Nianci began to grow impatient listening to them talk about the past. She wanted Guo Jing to help them escape first and then, when they were safe, talk over old times at leisure. Then she had a sudden thought, "If we leave now, I will never see 'him' again!" As soon as the thought came to her, she hurriedly pushed it aside. Guo Jing was also thinking that getting everybody out was the most important thing so he slowly raised his golden knife ready to strike the lock and cut it open.



Suddenly a glint of light appeared under the door and the sound of many footsteps could be heard approaching. Guo Jing quickly slipped behind a door just as the prison doors were pushed open and in marched several people. Through the crack in the door Guo Jing could see the person in front was a bodyguard carrying a lantern. Behind him was the Prince's Consort, Wanyan Kang's mother.

She asked the bodyguard, "Are these two the people whom the young prince imprisoned?"

The bodyguard replied, "Yes." confirming it was them.

She then ordered the guard on duty, "Release them immediately."

The bodyguard hesitated, reluctant to obey the order so she said, "If the young prince asks why you released them, tell him I ordered it; now quickly open the lock and free them!"

The guard dare not refuse the order any longer and opened the lock freeing them. The consort then produced two ingots of silver from her cloak and passed them to Yang Tiexin saying softly, "Please go safely!"

Yang Tiexin didn't take the silver but just stared at her without so much as a blink. The consort assumed from his stare that he was angry with her and felt remorse for what they had suffered. In a gentle voice she apologized, "Please forgive us, my son, by his disgraceful behavior, has wronged both of you most gravely today."

Yang Tiexin stared at her a while longer before slowly taking the silver and putting it in his robe without a word. He then took his daughter's hand and walked out of the prison.

The bodyguard called after him. "Hey you scum, don't you

have any manners? When our lady saves your life you should get down on your knees and kowtow to show your thanks!" But Yang Tiexin kept on walking as if he had not heard.

Guo Jing waited until they had closed the door. Only when he heard the consort was far enough away did he emerge from hiding and look around. By then there was no sign of Yang Tiexin or his daughter. He thought that they must have left the palace by now so he had better return to the 'Fragrant Snow Hall' and pull Huang Rong away from her listening so they could hurry back with the medicine for Wang Chuyi. As he rushed off following the winding path he saw two figures carrying red lanterns coming directly towards him in what seemed a great hurry. Guo Jing tried to hide behind some decorative rockery but he was too late, he had already been spotted.

"Who's there!" shouted one man as he dashed forward with his hands raised in a claw stance.

Guo Jing could only raise his arms to block the strike. In the light of the two lanterns he was able to clearly see that his attacker was none other than Wanyan Kang!

As it turned out, the bodyguard, after releasing the prisoners, had hurriedly reported the consort's actions to the young prince. Wanyan Kang was shocked when he heard this.

He thought to himself, "Mother's heart has always been too soft and she does not know the consequences of the old man and his daughter getting away! If my Shifu were to hear about this, and were to bring them to face me, how could I deny what's been going on! I would really be in much trouble!" He immediately rushed off to search for them and see if he could stop them in time before they

actually escaped from the palace compound. Running into Guo Jing was the last thing he expected.

They had already fought viciously that day and now they meet again in the middle of the night. One was in a hurry to rush back with medicine, the other in a hurry to kill two people to seal their lips. Now they fought even more viciously than before. Guo Jing tried to escape a couple of times but was blocked by Wanyan Kang. When Guo Jing saw the bodyguard coming forward drawing his sword ready to assist his master he thought things were going badly indeed!

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Liang Ziwong thought that Huang Rong was about to be defeated and turned to leave, but to his surprise he heard a call from the crowd that indicated a change in the situation. Huang Rong suddenly raised both her arms and tossed her head sending the three bowls of wine soaring straight up in the air. She then swung both fists towards Hou Tonghai and struck using a move called 'Eight Steps to Overtake the Moon'. Because Hou Tonghai was holding the wine bowls he couldn't block the strike and instead dodged quickly to the left. Huang Rong followed through with a flash of her right hand leaving Hou Tonghai no option this time but to block with his arm. Not only was he unable to stop the wine in his hands from spilling, but the bowl perched atop his head also tipped over and fell to the floor with a crash.

Huang Rong instantly stepped back and caught two of her bowls in mid air while the remaining one fell neatly onto the soft cloud of her hair, all without spilling so much as a drop of wine. Those present could not help murmuring 'Excellent' after seeing this brilliant performance of skill. Ouyang Ke however didn't murmur his praise but said it rather loudly. Sha Tongtian shot him an angry glare; but

Ouyang Ke did not notice and again called out, "Brilliant indeed!"

Hou Tonghai's cheeks flushed red, "Try that again!"

Huang Rong laughed and touched her cheek with a finger and said, "Now, now, aren't you ashamed?"

Sha Tongtian, seeing his younger martial brother's loss of face, let out a grunt, "Young girl, you are certainly full of devious tricks. Tell us, who is your master?"

Huang Rong smiled sweetly saying, "I'll tell you tomorrow. Right now I must be on my way."

Without appearing to bend a leg or take a step Sha Tongtian suddenly appeared in the doorway blocking Huang Rong's exit. Just a few minutes earlier Huang Rong had already learned just how powerful Sha Tongtian's kung fu was when he had grabbed and locked both of her hands. Now his 'Change Form Exchange Place' maneuver only served to highlight just how powerful an opponent he would be. Although she felt a slight rush of worry, her face didn't betray her feelings. Instead she showed a slight frown and asked in a slightly annoyed tone, "Why are you blocking my way?"

Sha Tongtian replied, "I want you to tell me which school you belong to and why you came barging into the palace."

Huang Rong arched her pretty eyebrows and asked, "And what if I don't tell you?"

Sha Tongtian snapped, "When the 'Dragon King of the Demonic Group' asks a question, there is no choice but to answer!"

Huang Rong saw that she was surrounded and there wasn't much chance of her making a run for it. She had seen Liang

Ziwong about to leave and called out to him pleading sweetly, "Uncle! This bad man is blocking my way and won't let me go home."

Liang Ziwong laughed when he heard her pleading in such a cute manner. "The 'Dragon King' has only asked you a question, why don't you be a nice girl and answer him? I'm sure he will let you go then."

Huang Rong laughed in her most charming way and replied, "But I just don't feel like answering." And then to Sha Tongtian she said, "OK - If you won't make way, I'll just have to dash through."

Sha Tongtian laughed coldly, "Only if you have the ability to get past."

Huang Rong demanded, "You must not lay a finger on me!"

Sha Tongtian replied, "What need is there for me, the 'Dragon King', to move a finger in order to stop a little girl like you."

Huang Rong exclaimed, "Good, it's settled then. A gentleman cannot go back on his word. Dragon King Sha, do you see that?" She pointed with her left hand off to one side of the room. Sha Tongtian looked over to where she was pointing and at this point Huang Rong made a dash to get past him while he was distracted.

She moved with blinding speed, but Sha Tongtian's reaction was even faster. He shot his right two fingers up and aimed towards her eyes as she moved forward. If she didn't stop she would be blinded. Luckily she was agile enough to stop in time and leap back away from the danger. She tried again and again from many different angles but each time she found her way blocked no matter how quickly she moved. Finally, when she found her nose almost smashing

into Sha Tongtian's shiny bald head threatening to stain it with blood from her broken nose, she gave up with a little shriek of frustration.

Liang Ziwong laughed heartily, "Dragon King Sha is a master at this, there is no point in continuing. Why not just admit defeat?" He then turned away and set off at a rapid pace back to his medicine store room.

As soon as he stepped into the room he smelled fresh blood and knew that all was not well. He looked down and saw, by the glow of his torch, the shriveled body of his prized red snake. All its blood had been drained and his stores of medicines were strewn about the place. Liang Ziwong's blood ran cold. Twenty years of work had been destroyed in one night! He clutched the body of his dead snake and couldn't control his tears.

The Ginseng Immortal was originally a ginseng picker on Changbai Mountain. Later he killed a seriously wounded senior master and from inside his sack he took a manual of martial arts secrets along with ten or so prescriptions for the preparation of different types of medicines, drugs and potions. The study of this book combined with use of these drugs would lead to martial arts of incredible power. Part of the preparation of the drugs required the raising of a special type of venomous snake. He searched deep in the forests and mountains to find this type of snake and fed it the most precious of herbs and other medicines. The snake's body was originally black, but over the years as he fed it cinnabar it gradually began to turn a bright red. After twenty years of feeding the snake it had only a few more days before it completed its transformation. Then he was called to Yanjing to meet with the Prince. When the snake was ready he need only drink the blood of the snake and meditate to gain the full benefit of the martial arts power. This would make his kung fu more powerful than ever.

Seeing his life's work not only lost to him, and possibly someone else having benefited instead, was more than he could bear.

After a few moments he managed to compose himself and saw that the traces of blood on the snake had not yet congealed. He realized then that it couldn't have been very long since the snake died, so the culprit must still be near by. He immediately leapt up into a tall tree and looked all around for any signs of the thief. From there he saw the vicious fight between Guo Jing and Wanyan Kang going on in the garden. Burning with fury and anger, he leaped down and sped off towards the fight. As soon as he arrived he could already smell the pungent smell of the snake's blood coming from Guo Jing.

Guo Jing was not yet Wanyan Kang's equal when it came to fighting, so from the start he was already at a disadvantage. To make matters worse, he felt his stomach burning with an unbearable heat as if it were full of boiling water. He was terribly thirsty and itched excruciatingly all over his body. "This time I'm certain to die," he thought. "The snake's poison is beginning to take hold."

In the midst of these fearful thoughts he was being struck repeatedly by Wanyan Kang's fists which were made even more painful by the effects of the poison.

"You filthy bastard!" Liang Ziwong yelled, "Who sent you to steal my precious snake?" He couldn't imagine that some stupid kid would know the secret of the snake. He thought it must be someone else who put him up to the task. In fact he was almost certain that it was Wang Chuyi who had sent Guo Jing.

When Guo Jing heard this he was furious. "That precious snake of yours attacked and poisoned me! I've got a bone of

contention to pick with you!" and he leaped towards Liang Ziwing with his fists raised ready to attack.

Liang Ziwing however smelled the scent of medicines mingled with the snake blood and had an evil thought. "He has drunk the snake's blood. If I kill him now and drink his blood then I may still gain the beneficial effects. Who knows, maybe the drug's effects will be enhanced..." As soon as he thought of this his anger vanished and he leaped towards Guo Jing to meet his attack. With his superior kung fu he was able to easily lock Guo Jing's arms and legs and hold him down. He then prepared to bite into Guo Jing's neck to extract his precious medicine...

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Meanwhile Huang Rong, no matter how quickly she moved, had not been able to get past Sha Tongtian. She was getting anxious about what would happen if he decided to catch her. She decided that a change of tactics may be appropriate. "If I can get through the door then you promise to let me be, okay?" She asked.

"If you can get through the door I will admit defeat." Sha Tongtian replied.

"Ai yo! What a pity my father only taught me the skill of entering, not the skill of leaving." she sighed.

"What is this 'entering' and 'leaving' skill?" Sha Tongtian asked half doubting, half curious.

"Your 'Change Form Exchange Place' skill, although not bad, is still far below those of my father's skills. Way below in fact." she boasted.

"Don't talk nonsense you stupid girl." Sha Tongtian retorted angrily. "Anyway, who is your father?"



"If I told you my father's name, I'm afraid I would scare you out of your wits, so it's best if I don't say." Huang Rong replied mischievously. "When he taught me the skill of entering he hid by the door way and I tried to rush in from outside. I tried many times but was never able to get past him. However, even though I cannot get out against you with your piddling skills, there is no way that you could stop me from getting back in. I wouldn't even have to raise a sweat!"

Sha Tongtian laughed coldly and said, "From outside going in or from inside going out, what's the difference? OK you come here and show me!" With that he moved aside to let her demonstrate the great 'entering' kung fu of which she boasted.

Huang Rong immediately shot outside and laughed, "Ha, you fell for my trick. You said a minute ago that if I could get through the door that you would admit defeat and would let me go. Well am I outside now? Did I not go through the door? Come now Dragon King Sha, you are an honorable man; your word is your bond. You cannot think of going back on what you promised in front of all these gentlemen."

Although Sha Tongtian knew that she had tricked him, she was correct, his word was his bond and he could hardly go back on what he promised. He scratched his bald head and flushed red but could see no way to get out of it.

Peng Lianhu, however, was not about to let Huang Rong get away. He suddenly shot out a stream of darts [fei biao] towards her. The darts were extremely fast but they were aimed near to the back of her head rather than right at her. When they hit the stone pillar by the door however, they ricocheted towards her. They were too fast for her to catch and she had no choice but to leap forward a pace to avoid them. The darts continued in a stream and each one forced

her to move forward a few inches. Before she knew it she had moved back inside the hall again!

Peng Lianhu's objective all along had been to force her back into the room and everyone watching proclaimed their praise at his skill. He just laughed and said, "What's this? You've gone back inside again!"

Huang Rong scowled, "Huh! You used your concealed weapons to bully a girl and force her to move, what's so fantastic about that!"

"Who was bullying you?" he asked incredulously. "I never laid a finger on you or harmed you!"

"Then let me go!" she said angrily.

"First tell us who taught you your kung fu." he demanded.

Huang Rong smiled and said, "I taught myself whilst in my mother's womb!"

Peng Lianhu said, "If you're not willing to tell us then perhaps I can find out another way!" With this he shot his fist straight towards her shoulder. Huang Rong didn't move or try to block the blow. She figured that he wouldn't dare to act so shamelessly as to hit a girl who refused to fight back.

When Peng Lianhu saw she wasn't going to fight he pulled his punch and withdrew his arm shouting, "Come on, show me what you've got. Stupid girl! I bet I can find out who your master by your style of fighting within ten moves." He had seen many styles during his life and although he had seen that Huang Rong was a very crafty girl, he was confident that she would not be able to hide her real martial arts style from him in a true fight. In fact he thought he needed no more than ten moves to do so.

Huang Rong asked, "And if you have not found out within ten moves?"

"Then I will let you walk free." he replied. Without further ado he launched an attack using 'Triple Linked Penetration' so called because it incorporated three movements.

Huang Rong turned her body and dodged while forming a ring with her thumb and little finger and stretching the remaining fingers to form a three-pronged fork. Using this she counter attacked using the 'Night Trident Searches the Sea'.

Hou Tonghai cried out, "'Night Trident Searches the Sea'! Senior Brother, this brat must be from the ... our school of martial arts!"

"Rubbish!" Sha Tongtian scolded. He knew the Huang Rong had already been teasing and making fun of Hou Tonghai for some time before tonight. He figured that she must have picked up the 'Night Trident Searches the Sea' from her earlier encounters fighting with Hou Tonghai.

Peng Lianhu couldn't suppress a laugh as he whirled around to attack again. Huang Rong turned obliquely to the left and without bending a knee or taking a step suddenly 'moved' to the side.

Hou Tonghai again exclaimed, "'Change Form Exchange Place' ! Senior Brother, did you teach her that?"

Sha Tonghai again scolded him saying, "Can you shut up - okay? You're always saying stupid things!" However, inside he couldn't help but admire Huang Rong's intelligence and skill in learning the basics of such a move after only having seen it once. Even if the execution of the move wasn't entirely correct, she had been able to dodge Peng Lianhu's strike. An amazing achievement!

As the fight continued Huang Rong attacked using the 'Soul Smashing Knife' followed by the 'Soul Snatching Whip' strikes. When Hou Tonghai saw these attacks and heard her call out "Yi Yi Yi" with each strike he couldn't help but call out, "Senior Brother! This brat must be from our school..." If he hadn't seen Sha Tonghai's face growing angrier by the minute he would have again called out the name of the sects moves.

Peng Lianhu was also getting angrier. He thought to himself, "So far I've been kind and have shown mercy with my attacks, but this girl is craftier than a witch. If I don't start using more vicious attacks I take the chance of not forcing her to reveal her true style."

Martial Artists, after training in their chosen style, may pick up moves from other styles and over time can even become quite proficient at them. However, in a life and death struggle, they will always return to their roots and use the style that they first learned and are most familiar with.

Peng Lianhu's first four strikes had been mild and contained no desire to injure. However from his fifth strike on his moves became like a whirlwind. When the spectators saw his moves take on a vicious turn they couldn't help but become worried for Huang Rong. No one had any idea of her background and although she had been stubborn, no one actually had any real grievance with her or wanted to see such a young, pretty and charming girl come to harm.

No one except for Hou Tonghai that is, who actually thought, "The sooner the bitch is dead the better!"

Huang Rong continued to hide her style by using strikes from Wanyan Kang's 'Absolute Perfection School' [Quanzhen] and Guo Jing's 'Southern Mountain Fists' style. She had only just learned these moves by seeing them

earlier the same day when Guo Jing and Wanyan Kang fought using them in the arena. For the seventh move she even used Peng Lianhu's 'Triple Linked Penetration' that she first saw only six moves ago! However now it was getting more and more dangerous. Even in a straight fight with Huang Rong using all her strength and true skills against Peng Lianhu she would not be able to prevail, how could she expect to survive using tricks picked up by observing others? She was gambling against the fact that, even though he was using vicious strokes, he wouldn't actually go so far as to kill her.

Ouyang Ke thought, "This little girl is remarkably smart. She can hold herself against that Peng guy's fists." Aloud he said, "Ai yo. Watch out, watch out. Why haven't you dodged left?"

Peng Lianhu's style used a brilliant mixture of false and real strikes, which he was able to switch between at will. On the eighth move he made a feint with his left and a real lunge with his right. Huang Rong expected him to do the opposite on the next move and feint with his right whilst attacking with his left. This meant that she ought to dodge to her right, but when she heard Ouyang Ke call out she immediately changed her mind and leapt elegantly to the left. This sudden posture was exquisite, and it turned out that nobody in the crowd recognized it.

When Peng Lianhu heard Ouyang Ke's crucial words of help he became furious. He thought, "Do you think that I won't kill you if I have to you stupid girl!" His nickname wasn't 'Butcher with a Thousand Hands' for nothing. He had an extremely cruel nature when angry. When he first saw Huang Rong he thought, that she being so young, and a girl, it would be shameful to kill her; but now, having reached the second last move of the contest and still unable to find her real school, he was so angry that he no longer

cared. He struck with 'Push Open the Window and Watch the Moon' using all his force, left hand "Yin", right hand "Yang", one soft, one hard, both pushing out simultaneously.

Huang Rong knew that things were desperate. She stepped back as she saw his fists coming towards her face. All that she could do was to duck her head, bend both her arms, point both elbows forward and strike at his chest.

Peng Lianhu expected her to try and block this strike and intended to follow up with the tenth stroke. However he was taken aback that she should actually try a counter attack against such a vicious strike. He had already half executed the tenth strike 'Falling Star Great Void', but immediately had to concentrate his internal energy to stop it, which was like trying to reign in a horse to keep it from running over a cliff. "You are a disciple of the 'Twin Killers of the Dark Winds'!" he called out with a shiver in his voice.

Huang Rong leapt back several feet. When Peng Lianhu called out these words a wave of fear went through the room. Everyone present, with the exception of Prince Zhao, knew of the dreaded 'Twin Killers of the Dark Winds'. Even the feared 'Butcher of a Thousand Hands' Peng was afraid to touch her now.

Before Huang Rong could say anything a cry sounded in the still night air. It was Guo Jing, and he sounded as if he was in real danger. Huang Rong was suddenly concerned about his safety and her face went white with fear.

Guo Jing's arms and legs were held down by Liang Ziwong. He wasn't able to move an inch, but as he saw Liang Ziwong coming closer ready to bite his throat he felt a sudden surge of strength born of desperation. Executing the 'Carp Arching Backwards' he was able to free himself and leap upright. Liang Ziwong quickly struck again. Guo Jing tried

to leap away but Liang Ziwing's speed was like the wind and there was no way Guo Jing could escape him.

"Smack!" a punch hit him square on his back and it was not at all like the earlier punches from Wanyan Kang. This one felt like it penetrated to the bone. Guo Jing was frightened out of his wits and didn't wait for another hit. He continued running straight ahead, away from everyone. His 'Qing Gong' (lightness skill) ability was very good and he used it to his maximum ability to speed through the trees and rockeries of the garden. Liang Ziwing was not able to keep pace.

Initially Guo Jing ran very fast but after a short while felt himself becoming slower and he began to pant heavily. There was a big hole torn in the back of his gown and he felt pain from where he had been hit. He thought that the Liang Ziwing's last punch must have actually been a claw and had taken some of his flesh away along with the back of his gown. He was very worried now and looked frantically for some place to hide. Straight ahead was the Prince's Consort's shabby compound. He rushed in with the hope that they wouldn't search there and he might be able to make his escape later. He lay down behind the wall at the back and didn't dare to move a muscle. Soon he heard Liang Ziwing and Wanyan Kang, one calling and the other answering, coming closer. Liang Ziwing was so angry he couldn't control his voice as he called out.

Guo Jing anxiously thought, "If I wait here by the wall it's only a matter of time before they find me. The Prince's Consort seems to have a kind nature, perhaps she will save me." Given the critical situation he didn't have any time to think further and he quickly slipped inside the house. There he found a lighted candle on the table in the middle of the room. The consort must be in another room. He quickly looked around the room and saw a wooden wardrobe in the

east corner which he opened and slipped in before partly closing it, leaving only a crack to see through. He then pulled out his golden knife and allowed himself to relax a little.

He heard footsteps and saw the Prince's Consort slowly walk in. She sat down at the table and looked at the candle as if in a daze. Before long Wanyan Kang entered and asked "Mother, did some bad man come in and give you a fright?"

The consort shook her head, so Wanyan Kang went outside again and continued searching elsewhere with Liang Ziwing.

Wanyan Kang's mother then closed the door and seemed as if she was going to bed. Guo Jing thought, "As soon as she blows out the candle I'll slip out through the window and escape. No - I had better wait a while first, in case I run into the young prince and that white haired fellow again. That crazy guy tried to bite my throat. That sure is some weird kind of kung fu! My Shifu's never taught me anything like that. I really must ask them about it next time I see them. Going around and biting people's throats! What's with that?" He then thought some more, "After fighting so much and being away for so long, Huang Rong must have gone by now. I had better get out as well otherwise she might be wondering what's been keeping me."

Suddenly the window creaked open and someone leaped in. Both Guo Jing and the consort were shocked. She let out a gasp but Guo Jing noticed that the person who had just entered was none other than Mu Yi or now Yang Tiexin. Guo Jing couldn't have been more surprised. He had assumed that he and his daughter had fled the palace long ago.

When the consort recognized him she quickly said, "Please hurry and leave, before they find you."



Yang Tiexin replied, "Many thanks for the consort's kind concern. If I didn't come here to thank you in person I would regret it to my dying day." His words contained the element of sarcasm as if full of bitterness.

The Prince's Consort sighed and said, "Please forget it. It is my son who has wronged you and your daughter." Yang Tiexin looked around and saw that besides a table, lamp, bed and wardrobe there was not much else. Everything seemed to be old, worn and familiar. He suddenly felt a wave of sadness and he could not suppress a tear as it trickled down his cheek. He wiped his eyes with his sleeve and walked over to the wall where a lone spear was hanging. He took it down and saw that it was covered with rust. He could still make out the four characters 'Tiexin Yang Clan' written on the spear's blade.

He gently stroked the spear's shaft and sighed, "This iron spear is rusty. It has not been used for a long while."

The Prince's Consort spoke softly, "Please don't touch the spear."

"Why?" Yang Tiexin asked.

"Because this is the most precious possession I have." she murmured.

Yang Tiexin was suddenly angry. "Really?" he asked bitterly. He paused before going on, "This spear used to have a matching partner, today however only one remains."

"What?" The Prince's Consort asked surprised, but he didn't reply. He hung the spear back on the wall and gazed at the broken plough tip while saying absentmindedly, "This plough tip is worn. Tomorrow you should call on Zhang Mu'Er in the east village to take a catty of iron and see if he can repair it."

When the consort heard this she felt as if she had been struck by a bolt of lightning. For a moment she was speechless as she stared at him. Finally she stammered, "Who...who are you?"

Yang Tiexin replied slowly but evenly, "I said the plough tip is worn. Tomorrow you should call on Zhang Mu'Er in the east village to take a catty of iron and see if he can repair it."

The woman felt her knees going weak. She again stammered, "Who...who are you? How...how could you know what my late husband said...said the night he died?"

The woman was none other than Yang Tiexin's wife, Bao Xiruo. When Wanyan Honglie was wounded by an arrow that day near Ox village, Bao Xiruo had saved his life. When he saw such a beautiful woman saving his life he couldn't stop thinking about her after he escaped that night. He bribed Duan Tiande to have his soldiers raid Ox village that night so that he could arrange to "save" Bao Xiruo and appear to be a hero. Once her husband and friends were dead she would be alone in the world and would naturally look to her "rescuer" to protect her. If he took her north and was patient enough she would sooner or later give up hope of return and agree to marry to him and start a new life together.

During the eighteen years at the palace, her face had not changed much at all. Yang Tiexin's face though had undergone changes from the hardships he'd encountered on the road searching for her. Now, when they'd met again, she could not at first recognize her former husband. After all these years of mutual longing to be together again, this night with so much danger made it seem as if they were in a dream.

Yang Tiexin didn't reply, he just walked over to the table and pulled open a drawer. Inside, he saw a couple of sets of a man's blue coats exactly the same as the ones he used to wear. He picked one up saying, "I have enough coats to wear. You are tired and should rest now that you are pregnant. No need to make more clothes for me." These words were the same ones spoken by him to her eighteen years earlier when she was pregnant.

Bao Xiruo rushed over to his side and grabbed his sleeve. When she pulled it up she saw an old scar. A mix of surprise and joy suddenly enveloped her. For the past eighteen years she had thought her husband dead and now to recognize him standing before her was like seeing a ghost coming back to life. She immediately hugged him, holding him tightly and crying, "Quickly! Quickly take me with you. Let us leave here now. I will show you a secret gateway where we can slip away unseen. I am not afraid of ghosts. I would rather become a ghost and be together with you than part with you again."

Yang Tiexin held his wife as warm tears rolled down his cheeks. After a long while he asked gently, "Do you think that I am a ghost?"

"I don't care if you are a man or a ghost, I won't let go of you again." she sobbed. "How is it that you are still alive? After all these years I can't believe that you are still alive. Where...what.."

Yang Tiexin was about to reply when Wanyan Kang's voice suddenly called from just outside the window, "Mother, why are you crying? Who are you talking to?"

Bao Xiruo had a fright. "It's nothing," she called out, "I was just dreaming."

Wanyan Kang had clearly heard the sound of a man's voice talking inside the room. He immediately became suspicious and walked around to the door, knocking gently saying, "Mother, I would like to have a word with you."

"Tomorrow," She replied, "Let's talk tomorrow. I'm very tired now and want to sleep."

When Wanyan Kang heard that his mother was not willing to open the door, his suspicions only increased. "I just want to have a few words then I'll go."

Yang Tiexin knew that Wanyan Kang was intent on coming in, so he went over to the window with the intention of making a quick get away. He tried to push open the shutter, but to his surprise he found that it wouldn't budge. Someone had locked it from the outside! Bao Xiruo was in a panic. She thought she would play for time and keep talking while Yang Tiexin found a place to hide. She hurriedly pointed to the wardrobe and motioned for her husband to hide inside. Imagine their surprise when they opened the door and found Guo Jing there! Bao Xiruo couldn't help but let out a little scream.

When Wanyan Kang heard this he became extremely worried. He thought someone was trying to harm his mother so he began trying to break open the door with his shoulder. There was no time to lose; Guo Jing grabbed Yang Tiexin and pulled him into the wardrobe and closed the door just as the wooden bar on the bedroom door gave a loud crack and flew open. Wanyan Kang rushed in. He saw his mother's face was pale with fear and her cheeks were wet with tears; but apart from her, there was no one else in the room.

"Mother, what's wrong? What's been going on?" he asked anxiously.

Bao Xiruo made an effort to compose herself before saying, "Nothing. I'm just not feeling well."

Wanyan Kang rushed over to her and said, "Mother, I promise I won't be doing anything stupid again. Please don't be worried. I've been a bad son to make you so worried."

"OK." She said in a comforting way, "I'm feeling so tired. Please let me go to bed. I'm very tired and want to sleep."

But Wanyan Kang heard a wavering in her voice and asked, "Mother, are you sure that no one has been here recently?"

"Who?" she asked.

"Recently a couple of bandits entered the palace."

"Really?" She replied. "You really should be going off to bed too. Don't let these things concern you."

Wanyan Kang said, "Yeah, I'm sure the guards, even though they're a useless bunch, will be able to take care of them. You need not worry. Please have some rest."

He was just on the point of leaving when he noticed the corner of a man's robe sticking out from a crack in the wardrobe door. Now he knew that something strange really was going on. He didn't say anything but instead sat down at the table and poured himself a cup of tea which he began to drink slowly while he mulled over what to do. "A man is hiding in the wardrobe, but I don't know if my mother knows this or not." He took a few more sips of tea before standing up and slowly walking over to the wall where the spear was hanging. "Mother, what did you think of your son's spear skills that you saw earlier today?"

"I have already told you that I don't like you using your skills to bully other people." Bao Xiruo said in a

disapproving tone.

Wanyan Kang replied in a hurt tone, "Bully people? I was merely competing one to one in a fair competition with that stupid boy." He then grabbed the spear off the wall and playfully tried a few strokes. The red tassel on the spear danced about as he executed the 'Rising Phoenix Soaring Dragon' strike aiming straight at the wardrobe. If this stroke went through the wardrobe, Yang Tiexin and Guo Jing, who could not see what was happening, would have no hope of fending off the attack. They would be dead for certain. Seeing this Bao Xiruo immediately fainted!

Wanyan Kang stopped short with his strike. Seeing his mother's reaction he immediately knew that she knew about the man hiding in the wardrobe. Propping the spear beside him, he lifted his mother up, but watched the wardrobe for any signs of movement all the while.

Slowly Bao Xiruo regained consciousness and when she saw the wardrobe still intact with no spear hole she immediately felt immense relief. Having undergone so many extreme highs and lows of emotions over the past hour she felt very weak all over.

Wanyan Kang was very angry, "Mother, am I your son or not?" he demanded.

"Of course you are my son. Why do you ask?"

"Well then, why do you keep so many things secret from me?"

Bao Xiruo thought to herself, "I must tell him about today's events and let him be reunited with his true father. After that I will take my life since I have lost my virtue and thus deeply wronged my husband. In this life I can never be

reunited with my husband Tiexin..." At this thought she again burst into tears which now flowed freely.

When Wanyan Kang saw his mother acting so strangely today he didn't know what to think. Finally Bao Xiruo said, "Please take a seat and listen to what I have to say very carefully." Wanyan Kang sat down as told but he stayed near the spear and continued to watch the wardrobe.

Bao Xiruo asked, "Do you see the four characters written on the spear?"

"When I was a small boy I asked you about those characters, but you refused to tell me what 'Yang Tiexin' meant."

"Well now I am going to tell you what they mean."

Yang Tiexin hiding in the wardrobe could clearly hear every word that was being said between the mother and son. Having an impulsive nature he thought to himself, "She is a Prince's Consort now. How could she possibly want to live with me again in a shabby hut in the wilds as a villager's wife? She is about to reveal my identity; could she actually be planning to have her son kill me?"

He heard her continue, "This spear is originally from a place call Ox Village in Jiangnan near the Song city of Lin'an. I sent men on a journey far away to fetch this for me. That plough, this table, lamp, bed, wardrobe, everything in this room was brought here from Ox Village."

Wanyan Kang interrupted, "I really don't understand why you insist on living in the shabby old shack. I can get you the most beautiful furnishings but you always refuse!"

"You say that this place is shabby. But to me it is better than the most intricately decorated palace! Child, you are not

fortunate. You have never lived with your true mother and father in such a shabby place.”

When Yang Tiexin heard this he felt a sudden wave of emotion and could not keep himself from shedding tears.

Wanyan Kang laughed, “Mother, the more you talk the stranger you become. How can father possibly live in this place?”

Bao Xiruo sighed: “Your poor father wandered all over the country for eighteen years living among the Jianghu [rivers and lakes]. He never had the opportunity to live peacefully in this house for even a day.

When Wanyan Kang heard this, his eyes opened wide and asked in a trembling voice, “Mother, what are you saying?”

Bao Xiruo asked in a sharp voice, “Who do you think your real father is?”

Wanyan Kang, mystified, said, “My father is the great Jin Prince Zhao. Mother...why are you asking me this?”

Bao Xiruo stood up and took the spear, cradled it in her arms, and with tears flowing again, said. “Child, you don't know, so I can't blame you. This...this is your real father's spear that he used many years ago...” Pointing to the characters on the spear she continued, “This is your real father's name!”

Wanyan Kang felt his body shake. “Mother!” he cried out, “You are talking rubbish. You must be going crazy. I'm going to call for the doctor.”

“Am I talking rubbish? You say that you are a Jin? You are Chinese! Your name is not really Wanyan Kang, it's Yang... Yang Kang!”



Wanyan Kang was shocked and very angry. He turned to go, shouting, "I'm going to ask father."

Bao Xiruo called out, "Your father is in there!" With this she took a bold step towards the wardrobe, pulled open the door and taking Yang Tiexin's hand led him out into the room.

## Chapter 10 - Enemies Meet

Translated by Rayon



*Following her instructions Guo Jing placed Mei Chaofeng on his shoulders, made an evading move, then hastened forward and they engaged*

*the enemy. His lightness kungfu was not weak and Mei Chaofeng's body was not heavy; with her on his shoulder Guo Jing's agility was not reduced.*

Wanyan Kang was shocked to find Yang Tiexin there and then recognized him. He shouted, "It's you!" Brandishing the iron spear, he quickly adopted the 'Step of the Marching Tiger' [Hang Bu Deng Hu], followed by the 'Facing Upwards to Burn a Joss Stick' [Chao Tian Yi Zhu Xiang]. The tip of the spear gleamed, going straight towards Yang Tiexin's throat.

Bao Xiruo called out, "He's your father, you... Don't you see?" As she raised her head, her son flung her against the wall, causing her to cry out. Wanyan Kang was shocked and quickly took a step back, still holding the spear. He glanced down to see his mother on the floor, her body covered with blood and her breathing shallow, so it was difficult for him to tell for sure if she was going to live or die. Remorse filled him and he was helpless for a moment. Yang Tiexin then bent down and took his wife into his arms and carried her towards the door and outside. Wanyan Kang called out, "Put her down!" He then used the stance 'The Lone Wild Goose Excels' [Gu Yan Chu Qun] and the spear, moving like the wind, headed towards his chest.

Yang Tiexin heard the rushing sound behind him and quickly sent out his left hand to counter. He was able to stop the iron spearhead about five inches from its target. On the battlefield, the 'Yang Family Spear' was invincible and one move, 'Turning the Spear on Horseback' [Hui Ma Qiang] was a unique skill passed from generation to generation. When Yang Tiexin used his left hand to grasp the spearhead, he was actually using some elements of this move but had to improvise a little. Originally, when he

grasped the enemy's weapon, he only needed to send out his right hand as the iron spear drew closer, but because he was holding Bao Xiruo, he could only turn around and shout angrily, "The 'Yang Family Spear' is passed on only to sons. A pity your Shifu did not teach you this."

Although Qiu Chuji's kung fu was very high, he actually did not research this spear art very deeply. The 'Yang Family Spear' was native to the Song Dynasty and was famous throughout Jianghu, but only nineteen schools were direct descendants of the orthodox school. He knew the principles of the orthodox 'Yang Family Spear' and that year when they fought in Ox Village, Yang Tiexin saw evidence of that. As for the unique skills that were passed on only from generation to generation, that, obviously, he did not understand. That was why Wanyan Kang also did not completely absorb the moves of the spear.

The forces applied by the two people caused the iron spear, which was already old and its handle already starting to decay, to break into pieces with a "ka" sound. Guo Jing jumped forward and shouted angrily, "You heard that he's your father, why do you not kowtow?"

Wanyan Kang hesitated, unable to decide. Yang Tiexin then cradled his wife in his arms and ran out of the room. Mu Nianci was waiting for him outside to help him and then both father and daughter leapt over the wall.

Guo Jing did not dare wait and also rushed out of the room. He was just about to head towards the wall to flee when he suddenly sensed a rustle in the darkness and something rushing towards his neck. He felt the force of a palm brush the tip of his nose and he felt a severe pain on his face like it was scraped by a knife. This person's internal energy was fierce and moreover, there was barely a sound, nearly taking him completely unaware. He was shocked as he

heard the person angrily shout, "Peasant boy, this old man has waited long enough! Extend your neck and let this old man drink your blood!" It was the 'Ginseng Immortal' Liang Ziwing.

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Huang Rong heard Peng Lianhu proclaim that she was a disciple of the 'Twin Killers of the Dark Winds'. She laughed and said, "You lose!" Then, she turned around and sprinted towards the hall's entrance.

Peng Lianhu quickly moved his body so that he was blocking the entrance and shouted, "Since you are a disciple of the 'Twin Killers of the Dark Winds', I won't embarrass you. But you must tell me, why did your Shifu send you here?"

Huang Rong, laughing, said, "You said that if in ten moves you can't recognize my sect, then you will let me leave. Old Senior, why are you being such a rascal?"

Peng Lianhu got angry, "That final move, the 'Spirit Sea Turtle Step' [Ling Ao Bu], didn't the 'Twin Killers of the Dark Winds' teach you that?"

Huang Rong laughed, "I only saw the 'Twin Killers of the Dark Winds' a few times and the level of their kung fu is low; how can they match my Shifu?"

Peng Lianhu said, "Your lying is useless."

Huang Rong answered, "I have actually heard of the 'Twin Killers of the Dark Winds'. I know that those two people are dishonorable; they will stop at no evil and cheat their elders. Their shamelessness is known throughout Wulin. How can Peng Zhaizhu [Chief] compare me to those two obscene people?"

The crowd at first thought that she was just unwilling to tell the truth; but when they heard her slander the 'Twin Killers of the Dark Winds' this way, they could not help but look at each other with blank dismay. Only then did they believe that she was in no way related to the two Corpses' sect. Although some people still wanted to find out if she was lying, they all decided that no one would dare to insult their Shifu in the presence of so many people.

Peng Lianhu stepped aside and said, "Young Miss, you win. Lao Peng admires you very much and wishes to know your name."

Huang Rong smiled, "I don't mind. I am called Rong'er."

Peng Lianhu asked, "Your surname?"

Huang Rong answered, "I'll be honest. I am surnamed neither Peng nor Sha." By this point, everyone in the hall, except the Tibetan Monk Ling Zhi and Ouyang Ke had lost to her. Ling Zhi was suffering from an internal injury and could not fight at the moment. That only left Ouyang Ke as the one who could temporarily stop her. The people all turned their gaze on him.

Ouyang Ke stepped forward, smiling pleasantly as he said, "This lowly one wants to go next and exchange moves with the young miss."

Huang Rong glanced at the white clothes he was wearing and asked, "You are with those pretty girls of the 'White Camel Group' [Bai Tuoshan]?"

Ouyang Ke smiled and said, "You have seen them? If you put all those girls together, they could not match even half your beauty."

Huang Rong's face turned red when she heard his flattery though she was also pleased. She said, "Then you'll help me with these old men who insist on being unreasonable."

Ouyang Ke's kung fu was high and with the support of his Shifu's younger brother, he was able to run amuck in the western region for many years. His lascivious nature caused him to spend all those years collecting beautiful women from different places and turning them into his concubines. To occupy their time, these concubines also studied kung fu and therefore, they were also his female disciples. When Prince Zhao summoned him to Yanjing, he brought twenty-four of them with him, dressing them up in white robes and mounting them on white camels. Because the concubines were many, they took turns riding while the others walked. Eight of them encountered the Six Freaks of Jiangnan on the road talking with Guo Jing. They heard Zhu Cong speak of the precious Han Xie [Blood-Sweating] horse's origin and intended to steal it and give it to Ouyang Ke as a gift; but they failed in their attempt.

Ouyang Ke was very proud of his collection of concubines and knew that they were the most beautiful women in the world. Not even the ladies of the imperial palaces of the Jin and Song Dynasties could compare with them. How could he have thought that he would meet a beauty like Huang Rong in the Zhao Palace? He saw that her eyes were bright, her cheeks tender and though still very young, her body was graceful. Her beauty was unsurpassed and none of his numerous mistresses could compare to her. When she displayed her exquisite martial arts skills, his heart fluttered. Now, as he listened to her friendly voice and the soft and gentle words, he felt his heart burn and his bones going soft. He could not say a word.

Huang Rong, "I have to go. If they try to stop me, you will help me, won't you?"

Ouyang Ke smiled, "If you want me to help you, then you must obey me as your teacher and stay with me forever."

Huang Rong answered, "Obeisance to the Shifu does not mean staying with him forever!"

Ouyang Ke said, "My disciples are different. They're all women so they follow me wherever I go. I only need to call and they will come."

Huang Rong tossed her head and laughed as she said, "I do not believe it."

Ouyang Ke whistled and at once about twenty white-clad women appeared at the entrance. Whether they were fair or dark, amply built or thin, all of them wore the same style of clothes. Their carriage was proud and their smiles seductive as they focused their eyes on Ouyang Ke. During the banquet earlier in the Fragrant Snow Hall, these mistresses remained outside the wall. This was the first time Peng Lianhu and the others saw them and in their hearts, they were envious of his good fortune.

When Huang Rong challenged him into calling his mistresses, her intention was to cause a disruption in the hall, and take the opportunity to escape; but who would have thought that Ouyang Ke anticipated her thoughts? He looked at the group of women and signaled them with his folded fan to stay in the entrance. Then, casting a sidelong glance at Huang Rong, he appeared casual and self-satisfied. The mistresses looked at Huang Rong fixedly; some of them feeling inferior while others felt jealousy in their hearts. They knew that the pretty girl had somehow caught the eye of Master Shifu's son. They could not allow her to become another one of his 'female disciples' because he might, thereafter, stop doting on them. These mistresses



gathered around him tightly, making it difficult for Huang Rong to rush out through the door.

Seeing that the situation was not favorable, Huang Rong said, "You prefer a real fight? You want me to obey you as my teacher, which is something I've never done before, and I don't want to cause any embarrassment."

Ouyang Ke asked, "Is it possible that you don't want to try?"

"OK, I will." Huang Rong answered.

Ouyang Ke said, "Good, then come. Don't be afraid. I won't hit you back."

Huang Rong said, "Why? If you don't hit back, I'll win, won't I?"

Ouyang Ke said smiling, "Even if you hit me, I'll still like you. How can I hit you back?" The crowd snickered at his frivolous manner but they were also wondering, "This young girl's kung fu is not weak. Even if you are ten times stronger, how do you expect to defeat her? What magic are you going to use?"

Huang Rong said, "I don't believe you're really not going to hit back. I must tie up both your hands."

Ouyang Ke then loosened the sash around his waist to give it to her. He folded his hands behind his back and walked towards her. Huang Rong saw that he seemed harmless but her mind continued to work. Although her face remained smiling, in her heart she was actually feeling more and more anxious as she paced back and forth for a while, thinking, "I have to be careful with my steps." Thereupon, she took the sash, spread both her hands, pulled on opposite sides, but the cloth was strong as though it was made of silk so that even though she used internal energy,

she still could not tear it. She immediately tied up his hands and smiled as she said, "How will we know who loses or who wins?"

Ouyang Ke stretched out his right foot, while keeping his left foot anchored, which left about three feet of distance in between. He proceeded to move his right foot against the brick floor, creating a sound like flowing water, until he made a complete circle six feet in diameter. Creating such a circle was no easy task and thus displayed his great internal energy. Sha Tongtian, Peng Lianhu and the others all looked on with admiration. Ouyang Ke stepped into the circle and said, "Whoever steps out of the circle loses."

Huang Rong said, "And if we both leave the circle?"

Ouyang Ke said, "Then, I lose."

Huang Rong answered, "If you lose, you won't try to chase or stop me?"

Ouyang Ke replied, "Naturally. But if you leave the circle, that will result in you becoming my little darling. Everyone here is witness to that."

Huang Rong replied, "Alright!"

She stepped into the circle, her left palm performing the 'Encircling the Wind to Stroke the Willow' [Hui Feng Fu Liu] and her right palm the 'River of Stars in the Sky' [Xing He Zai Tian]. The left was light and the right was heavy, both hands exerting hard and soft forces. Ouyang Ke dodged slightly and both his shoulders were struck at the same time. Huang Rong encountered the force coming out of his body, startled to find that this Ouyang Ke's internal energy was truly profound. Though he remained true to his word of not hitting back, he actually borrowed the force she used and used it as his own so that no matter how many

times she hit him, he was always able to retaliate immediately. His hands remained motionless but Huang Rong was unsteady, almost falling out of the circle. This was why she did not dare to attack for the moment as she paced inside the circle. Then she said, "If I leave, that doesn't mean you've won. You said before that if both of us leave the circle, you lose."

Ouyang Ke looked shocked as he watched Huang Rong jog out of the circle. She was afraid that a long delay might cause more complications so she quickened her footsteps. With her golden bangles sparkling and her flowing robes fluttering in the wind, she rushed towards the entrance. Ouyang Ke shouted loudly, "I've been tricked!" He could only shout a warning but could not pursue. Sha Tongtian, Peng Lianhu and the others saw how Huang Rong cleverly tricked Ouyang Ke and could not stop themselves from laughing loudly.

Huang Rong was just about to reach the entrance when a fierce sound could be heard coming from above and a large body suddenly dropped from nowhere. She moved sideways to avoid it, suppressing her fear at this unknown thing. She saw a person sitting down in a large round-backed wooden armchair; it was that tall Tibetan monk. He was wearing a red gown and even though he was seated, he was still able to tower over her. The skill with which he was able to leap high with the chair still stuck to his body was no ordinary feat. Huang Rong was just about to speak when she suddenly saw the Tibetan monk whip out a pair of cymbals from beneath his robes. He struck them together, releasing a shocking, deafening sound, before opening them like a flower and sending both, one on top of the other, flying fiercely towards her. The cymbals turned into a blur of shining metal, moving so fast it seemed there were a dozen of them. She tried to fend them off but the cymbals

suddenly became three. Startled, she turned only to find the cymbals still drawing nearer. She dashed forward, dodging, before immediately darting away; then reversed directions while sending out a right palm towards the top cymbal and her left foot flicked towards the two cymbals at the bottom. The two cymbals separated so that they were able to fly past. Her fierce stance was unusual but the cymbals were able to avoid it and Ling Zhi then leapt forward. He executed his 'Big Hand Imprint' [Da Shou Yin] towards her. Huang Rong was hit, the blow sending her violently towards the center of the crowd.

Everyone shouted in alarm at seeing the young girl hit by Ling Zhi's great palm, which had probably broken several bones and caused severe internal injuries. Ouyang Ke shouted, "Show mercy!" But was there enough time? He saw Ling Zhi's great palm strike her on the back, but also saw that the hand was withdrawn immediately, its owner cursing loudly. Huang Rong used the force of his palm to run out of the hall. He heard her clear laughter as though she was not injured at all. He expected that Ling Zhi's palm was strong but what he did not know was that before the palm could hit her fully, it was rapidly withdrawn so that the force behind the blow was greatly diminished.

The crowd watched with rapt attention when they heard Ling Zhi roar again and again, his right palm dripping with blood. He lifted it and saw ten small punctures. His features changed as he remembered, shouting, "Soft Hedgehog Armor...Soft Hedgehog Armor!" His voice revealed his great surprise, his anger, and his pain.

Startled, Peng Lianhu asked, "This girl was wearing 'Soft Hedgehog Armor'? That is the treasure of Peach Blossom Island [Taohua Island]!"

Sha Tongtian wondered, "How could someone her age get a hold of the 'Soft Hedgehog Armor'?"

Missing Huang Rong, Ouyang Ke ran out the entrance but he could barely see anything in the darkness. Not knowing where she was, he whistled for his concubines and ordered them to track her down. In his heart, he was secretly relieved, "It's good that she was able to escape and did not get injured. Good or bad, I must have her hand."

Hou Tonghai asked, "Shi Ge (Elder Martial Brother), what is this soft hedgehog armor?"

Peng Lianhu snapped, "Have you seen a hedgehog?"

Hou Tonghai nodded, "Of course."

Peng Lianhu replied, "Under her clothes next to the skin, she wears a sort of soft armor. Though soft, this armor can withstand the thrust of a sword or a spear. Moreover, it is covered with spines like those of a hedgehog. A single kick or punch will be enough to get you pricked!"

Hou Tonghai bit his tongue, thinking, "It's good that I wasn't able to hit that 'smelly boy'!"

Sha Tongtian said, "I'll get her back!"

Hou Tonghai looked at him and said, "Shi Ge, she... You can't touch her body."

Sha Tongtian, "Who asked for your opinion? I can still grab her hair."

Hou Tonghai replied, "Right, right, why didn't I think of that? Shi Ge, you are truly intelligent." Then both apprentice brothers and Peng Lianhu gave chase.

By now, Prince Zhao Wanyan Honglie heard the worried report from his son and learned that the princess had been taken prisoner. Angered, both father and son, together with their personal guards left the palace to chase after the culprits. At the same time, Tang Zude led another group of armed guards to search for and arrest the intruder. The palace was on full alert.

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Guo Jing had run into Liang Ziwong near the wall, but how could he just extend his neck and let him drink his blood? Shocked, he turned around and fled. He did not know which way was north or south so he decided to hide someplace. Liang Ziwong really wanted to drink his blood and did not slow down in the slightest. It was a good thing that Guo Jing's lightness kung fu was good; otherwise, even though the night was dark, he would have been captured a long time ago. The light from the torch died and he could no longer see where he was going; only sensing that he had somehow stepped into a thorny area where the ground was rugged and rocky. More people were coming out of the palace, so there was no time for Guo Jing to deliberate. The bristling thorns cut his legs, but when he thought about Liang Ziwong biting his throat, he could not let the tiny thorns bother him. Not even a mountain or forest of swords could stop him.

Suddenly, he felt the ground beneath him disappear, causing him to call out as he started to drop, falling some 45 feet into an extremely deep pit. While his body was in midair, he circulated his internal energy so that he would not lose his balance when he landed and to prevent himself from getting injured. But who would have thought that his feet would land on round stones? He lost his balance and fell down on his rear. His hands, which supported him, clutched one of these round stones. Fear shot through him

as he felt these round stones with his fingers; he realized that these stones were actually the skulls of dead people. It seemed that this deep hole was where the corpses of people executed at the Zhao Palace were dumped. He heard Liang Ziwong call out from above, "Boy, come up here!"

Guo Jing thought, "I'm not stupid enough to come up only to die!" With that, he raised his hand trying to touch the back of the pit, but he felt nothing. He moved forward, ready to defend himself against Liang Ziwong, who might follow him and try to kill him.

After shouting several curses, Liang Ziwong thought that perhaps Guo Jing could not get back up and shouted angrily, "Even if you run all the way to hell, this old man will still come after you!" Taking a deep breath, he jumped down.

Greatly surprised, Guo Jing took several steps back only to find empty space behind him. He turned around and stretched both his arms out trying to feel his way. As he continued on, he discovered that it was actually a tunnel.

Liang Ziwong also noticed the tunnel. His boldness was brought on by his high skill so that even though it was so dark that he could not see his five fingers, he was not afraid that Guo Jing would be laying an ambush for him. He followed, liking the situation even more, thinking, "This is just like seizing a turtle in a jar. This boy can't get away again. How can I not drink his blood now?"

Guo Jing was quite worried. Tunnels always have a dead end! Liang Ziwong was laughing loudly, both arms spread as he traced the tunnel walls. He was not impatient and took his steps slowly, one at a time.

Guo Jing ran several feet forward when he realized that the tunnel had ended, revealing an earthen cavern. Liang

Ziwong also followed, laughing, "The peasant boy wants to run away but to where?"

Suddenly, from the left corner came an eerie, raspy voice which said, "Who is it that acts unruly in here?"

Neither of them expected that someone lived in this black pit; but they could not deny this sound. The voice, though raspy, actually rumbled like thunder in their ears. Guo Jing was frightened and his heart was pumping madly. Liang Ziwong also could not restrain himself from feeling absolutely terrified. They heard the gloomy voice say, "Those who enter my cave are already rotting. Are you that impatient to die?" The voice now began to resemble that of a woman, anxious and breathing heavily as though she had contracted a serious illness.

When the two people realized that the voice did not belong to any ghost, their fears subsided. Guo Jing listened to her words and hurried to explain, "I did not mean to come here; some people are after me..."

Before he could finish his words, Liang Ziwong was able to discern where he was. He dashed forward, stretching his hands out to take him. Guo Jing heard the rustle caused by his palm and hastily dodged. Liang Ziwong changed directions at once, forcing Guo Jing to dodge once more to the right. It was pitch dark, so one could only grab aimlessly, while the other could only dodge blindly. Suddenly, there was a ripping sound. Liang Ziwong had taken hold of Guo Jing's left sleeve. The woman angrily said, "Who dares to capture a person here?"

Liang Ziwong scolded, "You disguise yourself like a crafty ghost. Are you trying to frighten me?"

Sounding asthmatic, the woman began to breathe heavily as she said, "Hmph, the young fellow can come here and



hide."

Guo Jing had thought that the situation he was in was hopeless and extremely critical, but when he heard her say that, without hesitation, he jumped to her just as he felt Liang's five icy cold fingers touch his wrist. They were much stronger than him so that when he was pulled by her, his body was not able to resist being thrown forward and felt himself growing numb. Gasping for breath, the woman said to Liang Ziwong, "You were able to grasp him adeptly which means your strength is not trifling. You are from beyond the mountain pass?"

Liang Ziwong was shocked as he thought, "I cannot see even half of her, how is it possible she was able to recognize my martial arts? Is she capable of seeing things in the dark? This woman must be an old eccentric who's proud and strict!" He did not dare to say anything careless or indiscreet and instead said pleasantly, "This lowly one, who is an invited guest here from Guandong, is surnamed Liang. This boy stole something from me and I'm trying to get it back. I ask your Excellency not to interfere."

The woman said, "Ah, is the 'Ginseng Immortal' Liang Ziwong trying to right a wrong? The other person seems unaware of it. I have no desire to interfere but after he came into my cave, the crime cannot be pursued. Lao Liang, you are an expert martial artist, don't you understand the rules of Wulin?"

Liang Ziwong was even more surprised and asked, "May I ask the name of your Excellency?"

The woman said, "I... I..." Guo Jing felt the hand grasping his wrist shiver violently, the fingers slowly beginning to loosen and he also heard her trying to keep down a groan

as though she was in extreme pain. He asked, "You are sick?"

Liang Ziwong's high kung fu allowed him to hear her groan and surmised that this person had lost her skills, not from a sickness, but from an injury which greatly weakened her. He immediately applied strength to his arms, sending both hands together to grasp Guo Jing's chest. He managed to brush against his clothing, waiting for his fingers to grab hold, when he suddenly felt a strong force meeting his wrists. Shocked, Liang Ziwong discovered that when he sent out his left hand, he'd managed to grab the woman's arm. The woman shouted angrily, "Prepare yourself!" A palm hit Liang Ziwong's back which forced him to take several steps back. Fortunately for him, his internal energy was good enough so that he was not injured.

Liang Ziwong said, "Mother-in-law of a thief [Hao zei po]! (The thief in question is Guo Jing.) Come here." When the woman continued gasping for breath and remained motionless, Liang Ziwong realized that she could not move the lower part of her body. His fear was immediately reduced and he began to slowly approach. He was just about to jump forward to attack when he suddenly felt something curl around his ankles. This thing was like a soft whip; silent and un-noticed. Greatly alarmed, he quickly tried to resist it, but the whip was able to lift his body in a flash. He tried to aim a kick at the woman just as the top of his head hit the earthen wall.

His leg kung fu was of a high level, unmatched in Wulin, which gave him more than twenty years of great prestige outside the mountain pass. This leg move, when executed, was incomparably fierce. Who would have thought that before the tip of his toe met its target, he would suddenly feel his 'Flushing Out the Sun' accupoint [Chong Yang Xue] growing numb. He immediately dodged, greatly alarmed.

This 'Flushing Out the Sun' point is located five inches from the instep of the foot. If this vital point was sealed by an opponent, his whole leg would grow numb. Luckily, he was able to withdraw his foot quickly; but the action of kicking and suddenly withdrawing caused his knee to ache.

As he dodged, Liang Ziwing thought, "This person lives in this dark cave but acts as though she is dwelling in a bright and sunny place. She was able to accurately find my vital point, how can she not be a witch or a demon?"

Realizing the critical situation he was in, he executed a half somersault to avoid the attack, and sent out a backward palm in an effort to shake her off. His palm was ten times stronger than before, and he thought that this asthmatic sounding person definitely would not have the internal energy to resist. Then he suddenly heard a loud cry as he felt the enemy's arm heading violently towards him, the fingertips already making contact with his shoulder. Liang Ziwing's left hand felt the opponent's ice-cold wrist, her body, appearing as though it was not made of flesh and bone, once more tried to attack. He immediately rolled away and rushed out using his hands and feet to crawl out of the tunnel. Panting heavily he thought, "I have lived for dozens of years but I have never encountered such a strange event! I don't even know if she is a woman or a ghost! I must inform the prince of this matter." He hastily ran back to the Fragrant Snow Hall. On the way, he thought: "I don't know if that creature is a woman ghost or female demon, but now that the boy has fallen into her hands, she will naturally suck all that precious blood from his body." He sighed and thought, "Due to a strange combination of circumstances I met that thieving boy. Then, after raising the snake and refining its blood, I had to run into that female ghost. I nearly lost my life in both encounters. Could the fabrication of the pill of longevity

really be against the will of Heaven and envied by ghosts and deities, so that I would fail on the verge of success?"

When Guo Jing heard him moving farther and farther away, he felt greatly relieved and fell on his knees, kowtowing to the woman as he said, "Junior politely thanks old senior for saving his life."

The woman had been able to match Liang Ziwing's moves earlier, but now she was exhausted, causing her injury to act up. She coughed and wheezed as she said, "Why did the old Monster want to kill you?"

Guo Jing, "Taoist Elder Wang was injured and needed medicine to treat his injuries. The disciple then came to the palace to..." Suddenly, he thought, "This person lives in the Zhao Palace compound, how do I know she's not in league with Wanyan Honglie?" He stopped talking immediately.

The woman said, "Mmm, so you have stolen the old Monster's medicine. I have heard that he is very knowledgeable in the research of medicines and their properties, so you must have stolen a miraculous pill or a marvelous drug."

Guo Jing, "I took some of his medicine to treat an internal injury, but he was so angry he wanted to kill me. Is the old senior injured? Disciple has several medicines, four samples of 'pseudo ginseng', 'dragons blood', 'bear's gall', and 'myrrh'. Taoist Elder Wang does not have to use all of it, if old senior..."

The woman angrily said, "Whether I'm injured or not, what concern is it of yours?"

At this juncture, Guo Jing could only say hastily, "Yes, yes." But after only a moment, he heard her gasping for breath

and could not restrain himself from saying again, "If old senior cannot walk, junior offers to carry you out of here."

The woman scolded, "Who is old? Who are you to say that someone is old?"

Guo Jing no longer dared to utter a sound, thinking that she did not want to leave. However, he had always been unable to stay content with half answers, so even though he knew that he ought to keep his silence he once again asked, "Whatever you want, I can go get it for you."

The woman laughed coldly and said, "You are as nosy as a woman but your heart is good." She stretched out her left hand to pull on his shoulders. Guo Jing felt his shoulder snap and the sharp pain that followed, but he was able to keep himself from falling on top of her. He suddenly felt an icy coldness as the woman's arm wound around his neck. Then he heard her bark the order, "Carry me to the exit."

Guo Jing thought, "That's what I offered in the first place!" Thereupon, he bent at the waist and slowly made his way out of the tunnel.

The woman said, "I am compelling you to carry me on your back. I won't owe anyone any favors." It was then that Guo Jing understood that this woman was very arrogant and was unwilling to receive any kindness from her juniors. As he walked out, he raised his head and saw the stars in the sky. He could not help letting out a sigh as he thought; "Only a moment ago, I was saved from death when I fell into this black hole and there was someone waiting to help me. If I told Rong'er about this, even she would not believe it. He was used to climbing cliffs with Ma Yu and even though that hole was like a deep well, he was actually able to climb up effortlessly.

As soon as they exited the hole, the woman asked, "Who taught you your lightness kung fu? Tell me quickly!" Her arm suddenly tightened, compressing Guo Jing's throat so he was gasping for breath. Alarmed, he hastily circulated his internal energy to resist. The woman was intentionally trying to test his skill by tightening her grip, but she paused before gradually relaxing.

She loudly exclaimed, "Surprise, the peasant boy knows the internal energy skills of the Taoist orthodox school. You said that Taoist Elder Wang was injured, by what name is this Taoist priest called?"

Guo Jing thought, "You have rescued me, so whatever you ask, I will answer you truthfully. To do otherwise would be barbaric!" He immediately replied, "Taoist Elder Wang is Wang Chuyi, but others call him the 'Jade Sun'."

Suddenly, he felt the woman on his back begin to shake and heard her breathe out heavily, "You are a Quanzhen Sect disciple? That...that is very good." As soon as she said this, she could not contain her delight and she went on to ask, "Who is Wang Chuyi to you? Why do you call him 'Taoist Elder'? Why not Shifu [master], Shi Zi (martial uncle younger than a person's Shifu), or Shi Bo (martial uncle older than a person's Shifu)?"

Guo Jing, "I am not a Quanzhen Sect disciple, but 'Scarlet Sun' Ma Yu taught me his breathing techniques."

The woman said, "Mmm, so you studied the internal energy methods of the Quanzhen. That is good." After a moment, she asked, "Who then is your Shifu?"

Guo Jing replied, "Disciple has seven teachers, the Seven Freaks of Jiangnan. First Shifu is called 'Soaring Through the Heavens Bat' and is surnamed Ke."

The woman began coughing violently, the sound bitter and sour as she said, "That is Ke Zhen'E!"

Guo Jing, "Yes."

The woman said, "You come from Mongolia?"

Guo Jing said, "Yes." But in his heart, he wondered, "How did she know I come from Mongolia?"

The woman said slowly, "Your name is Yang Kang, is it not?" Her tone of voice changed from gloomy to angry.

Guo Jing said, "No. Disciple is surnamed Guo."

The woman hesitated for a moment before saying, "You sit on the ground."

Guo Jing did what he was told and sat down. The woman then reached inside her bosom to fish out an object which she placed on the ground. This object was wrapped in a piece of cloth. When she revealed the thing, the star light shone on it, showing a dazzling and impressive looking dagger handle. Guo Jing thought it looked familiar and so he took a closer look; the dagger continued to shine brightly and on its handle were engraved the two characters 'Yang Kang'. It was indeed the knife he'd used to kill 'Copper Corpse' Chen Xuanfeng. The year that Guo Xiaotian and Yang Tiexin met 'Eternal Spring' Qiu Chuji, he gave them daggers as presents. Both made the promise that if their wives gave birth to sons, the sons would become sworn brothers and if two daughters, they would become sworn sisters. However, if they are of different genders, then they would become husband and wife. The two fathers then exchanged their daggers as a token of their faith. This was the reason why the dagger with the inscription 'Yang Kang' ended up in Guo Jing's hands. When he was younger, he did not know what the two characters

'Yang Kang' meant but the shape of the dagger was enough for him to recognize it. He thought, "Yang Kang...Yang Kang?" But he did not remember that this name had been spoken by the princess only minutes ago.

While he was hesitating, the woman clamped his hand to prevent him grabbing the dagger as she shouted, "You recognize this dagger, do you not?" If Guo Jing was more quick-witted and heard how sad and shrill her voice sounded, he would have felt compelled to turn his head and look at her. Instead, he thought only of the other's kindness in saving his life, "This person saved my life. Certainly, that means she is a good person." Therefore, he was not the least bit suspicious as he immediately replied, "Ah, yes! When I was young, I once used this dagger to kill an evil man. That evil man suddenly disappeared, along with the precious dagger ..."

As he spoke, he felt the arm around his neck tighten suddenly, strangling him. In the midst of danger, he bent his arm and pushed it backwards but his wrist was held by that woman's outstretched left hand. The woman later relaxed her right arm, allowing her body to drop so that she was sitting on the ground as she shouted, "Who do you think I am?"

Guo Jing had been throttled by her earlier, making him see stars, so it took him a moment to recover. Afterwards, he looked at her only glimpsing, through her shawl of long hair, a face like white paper; it was the face of 'Iron Corpse' of the 'Twin Killers of the Dark Winds', Mei Chaofeng. Frightened out of his wits, he lifted his left hand to struggle but with her fingers digging into his flesh, how could he escape? In his mind was confusion, "How come? Why did she save my life? It can't be! But she really is Mei Chaofeng!"



Mei Chaofeng sat on the ground, her right hand clutching Guo Jing's neck, her left holding his wrist. For more than ten years, she had been searching for the man who killed her husband and now, suddenly, he was here. "Is it the work of my 'Bastard' husband from below, to have that person die in my hands?" In her heart she was delighted beyond measure; but this was quickly overcome by grief as past events from her life, no matter how much she fought it, came to her in brief flashes.

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She thought, "I was once an innocent young girl who played around and joked all day. My parents treated me as their most precious treasure to which they were much attached. At that time, I was called Mei Ruohua. However, my unfortunate parents died one after another, forcing me to suffer under an evil person. Shifu Huang Yaoshi rescued me and brought me to Taohua Island (Peach Blossom Island) where he accepted me into his school. My name was changed to Mei Chaofeng, for each of his disciples bore the character for "wind" [feng] in their names. Under the peach trees, I saw rugged looking youths standing in front of me. One of them picked a bright red peach and gave it to me to eat. That was apprentice brother Chen Xuanfeng. Among Shifu's disciples, he was the second; I was the third. We practiced kung fu together. He often taught me and treated me very well. Even though he sometimes scolded me for not studying hard, I knew he was only doing what was good for me. Slowly, as everyone grew up, I had him in my heart and he had me in his heart. One spring evening, when the peach blossoms were turning a brilliant red, he suddenly embraced me under a peach tree." A blush colored Mei Chaofeng's face and Guo Jing heard her laborious breathing intensify. Then, she let out a soft, gentle sigh.

Mei Chaofeng recalled how she and Chen Xuanfeng secretly married each other and how they feared their Shifu's punishment. When they ran away from the Island, her husband told her to steal the second book of the 'Nine Yin Manual' [Jiu Yin Zhen Jing]. Later, they settled on a remote mountain where they trained hard; but after practicing for half a year, her husband said that he could not understand the true meaning of the text. He wanted to smash his head out of frustration. That same year, my husband said, "My 'Shrew', we only stole one half of the 'Nine Yin Manual'. The first half contains the foundation principles needed to practice these secret kung fu techniques. The kung fu scripture belongs to the Taoists and what our Shifu taught us is completely different. We can't master this, what do you suggest we do?" I said, "What choice do we have?" He said, "Return to Taohua Island." How would I dare to go back? Both our skills had become ten times stronger but our Shifu would only have to use two fingers to defeat us. My husband was also afraid but knowing how many wonderful techniques he could not practice, he was willing to die for them. He had made up his mind to steal the first part and said, "If we are going to be the unmatched couple under the heavens, then 'My Shrew' must be prepared to be a widow." I did not wish to be a widow! If one must die, then the other must also die in the same place. Both of us decided to risk our lives by going back. We found out later that after we ran away, Shifu, in a great fit of anger, broke the legs of all his disciples and expelled them from his island. That was why there was only him, his wife, the two of us, and his servants. When we arrived at Taohua Island, we discovered two people engaged in a fight. Shifu's opponent looked like an expert. The two of them were arguing about the 'Nine Yin Manual' and as they quarreled, one of them opened with a recognizable move. This person was Quanzhen Sect and although he spoke foolish words, his kung fu was very high and had reached a level which I

could not even imagine. But Shifu, when compared to him, had a better chance of winning. Witnessing this martial arts duel only served to frighten us out of our wits. I said quietly, "My Bastard, we are inferior. Let's get away!" But he was not willing. We watched as Shifu grabbed his opponent and forced him to take an oath of never voluntarily leaving the Island. Remembering that Shifu's wife used to treat me with kindness, I decided to look for her through the window of their home. Who would have thought that all I would see was a mourning hall? Shifu's wife had passed away. In my heart, I felt very sad. Shifu's wife always treated me well but now that she's dead, Shifu was alone. I really felt sorry for him and I couldn't stand it. While I was crying, I suddenly saw, near the mourning hall, a one-year old girl, sitting straight up in a chair and smiling at me. This girl really looked like my Shifu's wife so I supposed she was their daughter. Was it because of childbirth that she died? I was thinking about this when Shifu noticed me. He flew from the mourning hall and stepped outside. I was so frightened, my feet grew weak and I couldn't move. I heard the girl laughing and calling, "Daddy, hugs!" Her smile was like a flower as she opened her arms towards Shifu. That girl saved my life. Shifu feared that she would fall down and so stretched out a hand to grab her. My husband then pulled me away and we both dashed out and stole a boat with sea water splashing inside. My heart was thumping so hard, it seemed like it was going to jump out of my throat.

'My Bastard' saw Shifu fighting and had immediately lost heart. He said, "Not only have we not learned a tenth of Shifu's kung fu, but we now see this Quanzhen master, how can we compare to them?" I said, "You regret coming here? If the Shifu can do it, then one day we can also learn his kung fu." He said, "If you don't regret it, then I do not regret it." Thereafter, he used the fiercest martial arts methods he could find and taught me everything. He said

that although this method was heretical, it allowed us to increase our skills.

In the beginning, our abilities became astounding and as we ran amok in Jianghu, we earned the nickname of 'Twin Killers of the Dark Winds'. Shen Long who flew through the sky with his axe exorcising evil spirits, was it my husband who killed him or was it me? My memory is not too clear as to who killed who but it is all the same in any case. One day, when we were practicing the 'Destroying Heart Palm' [Cui Xin Zhang] in the temple ruins, suddenly, from all directions, appeared dozens of skilled people. They were led by our fellow apprentice, Lu Chengfeng. He hated us after Shifu broke his legs and gathered a large group of people to help him capture us to give to Shifu. This man really thought that he could defeat us. Humph, the 'Twin Killers of the Dark Winds' are not that easy to defeat. Though we were able to kill seventy-eight men and run away, we were also heavily injured. After several months, we found out that the Quanzhen Seven Masters were also secretly following us. We did not want to fight these opponents all at once because they were too many, so we left the Central Plains and traveled until we reached the Mongolian steppe. 'My Bastard' was worried that people would steal the Taoist scripture so he told me not to look for it. I did not know where he hid it. I said, "Good, my 'Bastard', I don't know where to find it." He said, "My 'Shrew', I will be good to you. I'll take care of you and teach you everything except the Taoist nei gong. If we force it, we could harm our bodies." I said, "Alright! What are you waiting for?" Thereupon, we continued to practice the 'Nine Yin White Bone Claw' [Jiu Yin Bai Gu Zhua] and the 'Destroying Heart Palm' [Cui Xin Zhang]. He said these two techniques were heretical and fierce but did not require one to learn nei gong. Suddenly, one evening on that stark mountainside, the Seven Freaks of Jiangnan attacked me.

"My eyes...my eyes!" The pain was burning from the poison. I crawled on the ground, clawing my eyes. I did not die but my eyes were blinded and my husband dead. That was retribution for that time when we killed that blind Ke Zhen'E's elder brother and blinded his (Ke Zhen'E) eyes.

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As Mei Chaofeng thought about this painful matter, both hands tightened instinctively and she created a noise as she ground her teeth. Guo Jing felt as if the bones in his left hand were going to break and secretly thought, "This is not good. What kind of vicious method is she going to use to kill me?" Then, he said, "Hey, I don't know what you plan to do but I want to ask you something, please agree."

Mei Chaofeng said coldly, "You want to ask me something?"

Guo Jing said, "Yes. I have medicines and I ask you to be generous. Please take these and give them to Taoist Elder Wang in the Prosperity Inn outside the city."

When Mei Chaofeng did not answer and continued to look blankly at him, Guo Jing said, "Do you agree? If so, many thanks to you!"

Mei Chaofeng said, "Many thanks for what? In all my life, I've never done any good deeds!"

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She could not call to mind how much pain she suffered in her life, nor could she recall how many people she had killed, but that night on the barren mountain, she remembered clearly. My surroundings suddenly went black and I could not even see the stars. 'My Bastard' said, "I have failed! The Taoist scripture is hidden on my chest..." These were his last words. Suddenly, a heavy rain began

and the Seven Freaks of Jiangnan began fiercely attacking me. I was hit in the back by a palm. This person's internal energy was profound; the pain from his hit reached my bones. I carried husband's corpse and escaped, descending the mountain even though I could not see. They did not pursue me which was really strange. The rain became heavier and the night had grown pitch-dark so they could not see me. I dashed about wildly in the rain. "My 'Bastard' husband's body was at first hot but afterwards, it gradually turned cold. My heart also turned cold with each minute that passed. I was shaking all over; I was very cold. "My 'Bastard' husband, are you really dead? Even with your fierce kung fu, how could you die so inexplicably? Who killed you?" I drew out a dagger from his stomach, causing the blood to spurt out. What caused this? Murdered people certainly bleed, but I did not know how many people I murdered. "I must die with my 'Bastard' husband! If no one else will call him 'My Bastard' in the netherworld, he will be lonely!" I placed the dagger to my throat and prepared to slice when suddenly, I traced two characters on the dagger handle, the characters 'Yang Kang'. "Mmm, the killer must be this person named Yang Kang. How can I not exact revenge? If I don't kill this Yang Kang first, how can I die?" Thereupon, I went through my husband's pockets, searching for the secret Taoist scripture, but even though I searched his whole body, I was not able to find a trace of it. "I must find it!" I started from his hair, not missing an inch until suddenly, while I was feeling the skin on his chest, I felt something strange.

As she had this thought, she was unable to restrain her bitter laughter. She said, "After careful investigation, I found that the 'Jiu Yin Zhen Jing' was tattooed on his chest. You were afraid that someone would steal it from you so you tattooed it on your body so it couldn't be taken away! Yes, just like Shifu's martial arts teachings, someone could also

steal the Taoist scripture from us so you came up with a way it couldn't be stolen. Your idea 'a person comes, but after he is gone, everything goes with him'. I used the dagger to cut your chest, mmm, I must tan this skin so it won't rot. I will keep it with me all the time so it will be like you are accompanying me forever." I was not sad anymore. "When I laugh, people are usually frightened even though I was smiling. I used both hands to dig a pit in the ground to bury you inside. You taught me the 'Jiu Yin Bai Gu Zhua' before; I used this technique to dig your grave. I hid in a cave, afraid that the Seven Freaks of Jiangnan would find me. At that time, I was not their match but after some practice, humph, I could grab each of their hearts. Was it really dangerous to practice the Taoist nei gong? It would cause serious injuries but I was not afraid to die, but of what sort of injury? I must perfect my kung fu in the shortest time. It must have been some sort of divine intervention that 'My Bastard' tattooed the Taoist scripture on his body or with my blind eyes, what purpose would the written words have? After all these years, even when he was playing with me, he never removed the clothing on his upper body; now I know why..." When she thought about this, her face burned and she released a long sigh. What is it 'My Bastard', can you see me from the netherworld? If you married a female ghost and made it your wife, then we do not have forever...

Two days passed and I was very hungry; then suddenly I heard a large army on horseback pass by the cave. From their dialect, I knew that they were from the Jin Empire. I came out and asked them for something to eat. The leader of the army saw my pitiful state, decided to give me shelter and brought me all the way to the palace. Afterwards, I discovered that he was actually the sixth son of the Jin emperor, Prince Zhao. I swept the ground in the back gardens for them but in the evening, I secretly trained. In this manner I was able to practice for several years and no

one noticed anything. They only thought of me as a pitiful blind married woman.

One evening, that mischievous young prince went looking for bird's eggs in the garden at midnight without telling anyone. I did not see him but he saw me practicing with my silver whip and thereupon coerced me into teaching him. I taught him three moves and he learned them; he was really intelligent. Pleased with his progress, I also passed on to him the 'Nine Yin White Bone Claw', and the 'Push the Heart Palm'. I wanted him to take the oath of not telling anyone, not even the prince or the princess. If he divulged it to anyone, I told him that I would capture him, break his bones, and send his soul to heaven. The young prince practiced kung fu and his foundation was not low. He said, "Shifu, I also have another male Shifu. This person is not good and I do not like him. I only like you as my Shifu. I will never reveal to him that you are teaching me. He can't compare to you. His kung fu teachings are not effective." Humph, the young prince knew how to flatter. His male Shifu was definitely not incompetent. But I only asked that he not tell him that he was studying kung fu with me and I in turn would not question him about his Shifu. Several years passed and the young prince said that Prince Zhao wanted to go to Mongolia. I asked the prince to allow me to go there with him to offer a sacrifice at my husband's grave. The young prince said to me that the prince agreed. The prince doted on him very much and whatever he asked, he agreed to.

Even if I couldn't find my husband's bones, I kept the skin from his flesh next to my own skin all day and all night. Besides, why would I offer a sacrifice at his grave? I wanted to find the Seven Freaks of Jiangnan for revenge. But my luck was not good because, unexpectedly, the Seven Elders of Quanzhen were all in Mongolia. My eyes could not see,



how could I match those seven people? 'Red Sun' Ma Yu's internal energy was profound. Even though he spoke without effort, his voice was able to travel far. But my going to Mongolia was not in vain because when I asked Ma Yu a question he answered, and passed on to me some nei gong (internal energy) secrets. After I came back to the palace, I went to the tunnel to practice diligently. But this internal energy could not be completed without guidance. Two days ago I was practicing and as I was vigorously moving around, my qi suddenly arrived in my hip area and I could not move it back up. Because of this, the lower part of my body suffered seriously. If the young prince did not look for me, how would anyone know that I had an accident while practicing? Had this Guo boy not rushed in here, I would have starved to death in that tunnel. Humph, it's my husband's ghost that sent him there to rescue me so I could I kill him to avenge his death. Mei Chaofeng laughed madly; her whole body shook and her right hand suddenly made an effort to grab Guo Jing's neck. Guo Jing sensed the danger to his life at this critical moment and tried to turn her hand wrong side up by grasping her wrist, using his external strength. Because of Ma Yu's orthodox school teachings his internal energy was not weak. Mei Chaofeng could not gain a grip as she felt her hand being turned wrong side up by him, forcing it to open. Startled, she thought that this boy's kung fu was not bad!

Even after being hit three times, Guo Jing applied all his strength in that hand. Mei Chaofeng called loud and long while lifting her palm to hit him. She was using her 'Destroying Heart Palm' unique skill. Guo Jing's level of skill and hers differed too much to begin with and his left was held firmly by her, how could he move to gain an opening? But he had to exert himself to overcome her strength and lifting his right hand to block. Mei Chaofeng raised her hand to meet his only to feel her arm shake. She changed

her mind at that moment as she considered, "I practiced nei gong without anyone to guide me and it resulted in a serious injury so that my lower body can't move. I heard him say a moment ago that Ma Yu taught him the Quanzhen Sect nei gong. It would be convenient if I forced him to tell me those nei gong secrets. How can I kill him to avenge 'My Bastard' and pick his brain later? Fortunately, this boy is not dead yet." At that moment, she returned her hand again to grasp Gou Jing's neck and said, "You killed my husband, how can you still expect to live? But if you listen to what I have to say, then I'll let you die quickly, but if you're stubborn, I will let you experience suffering and misery. I'll start with your finger, biting and chewing it until everything is eaten."

She had an accident, resulting in lower body paralysis. Afterwards, she starved for days so when she said that she wanted to eat Guo Jing's finger, it was not just idle talk to intimidate him. Guo Jing felt a shiver as he saw her open mouth, showing several white teeth. He did not dare say a word.

Mei Chaofeng asked, "Ma Yu taught you how to sit properly while meditating, how is it done?"

Guo Jing then understood, "She thinks I will teach her nei gong. Then later, she will go after my six Shifus to harm them. Even if I die now, how can I let this jealous woman increase her skill and harm my six Shifus?" He shut his mouth and did not answer immediately.

Mei Chaofeng's left hand tightened and Guo Jing felt pain and biting cold, but he had made up his mind. He said, "You want to obtain the orthodox nei gong. Give up that idea."

Mei Chaofeng saw that he was tough and unyielding so she loosened her hands to let him go as she said softly, "I

promise you that I will take the medicine to Wang Chuyi and save his life.”

Guo Jing felt a shiver of cold as he thought, “Ah, this is an important change. It's good that the lower part of her body cannot move. My six Shifu have no need to fear her.” Thereupon he said, “Alright, you make an oath and I in return will pass on to you the training methods.”

Mei Chaofeng was extremely happy and said, “Surname of Guo... This boy with the surname of Guo said that he will teach me the Quanzhen Sect nei gong methods. If I, Mei Chaofeng, do not deliver the medicine to Wang Chuyi, may my entire body lose its movement and forever endure misery.”

As soon as she said this, to their left some ten zhang in front of the palace, a person scolded, “Stinky boy, come out here and die!”

When Guo Jing heard the voice, he recognized it as the Three-Headed Dragon Hou Tonghai. Another one said, “Surely, the small girl is nearby. I'm relieved. She can't run away.” The same time that the two people were talking, they were also walking away.

Guo Jing was startled; Rong'er had not left yet and allowed them to follow her trail. Changing his intent, he turned to Mei Chaofeng and said, “You still need to do one more thing, otherwise, no matter what you force me to endure, I won't tell you the secrets.”

Mei Chaofeng got angry, “What is this other thing? I don't agree.”

Guo Jing said, “I have a good friend, a young girl. The experts from the palace are chasing her. You must rescue her and get her out of danger.”

Mei Chaofeng grunted and said, "How would I know where she is? If you want me to do it then quickly, tell me the nei gong secret!" Her arm immediately tightened.

Guo Jing felt his throat constrict, causing him great alarm. However, he was still unyielding and said, "Rescue... You said... Did not say..."

Having no other alternative, Mei Chaofeng said, "Alright, I'm depending on you but don't think that Mei Chaofeng does things to please others. Today is the exception, you stinky boy. This young girl is your sweetheart? You're full of affection but dumb. We made a deal and I'm only doing my part. I have agreed to rescue your sweetheart but I haven't consented to spare your life."

Guo Jing heard her agree and was glad. Then he raised his voice and called out, 'Rong'er, come here! Rong'er...'

Just after calling twice, Huang Rong's figure suddenly appeared from behind some rose shrubs nearby. She said, "I'm already here!"

Guo Jing was delighted, "Rong'er, come quickly. She agreed to help you. The others can't harm you now."

Huang Rong had been listening to Guo Jing and Mei Chaofeng for some time from behind the rose shrubs. She heard how he gave no thought to his own life and never forgot about her safety. In gratitude, two tear drops rolled down her cheeks as she shouted at Mei Chaofeng, "Mei Ruohua, let him go!"

'Mei Ruohua' was Mei Chaofeng's name before her master changed it. No one in Jianghu knew and for dozens of years, she had not heard these three characters uttered by anyone. However, today it was being shouted by this person. Greatly surprised, she asked, "Who are you?"

Huang Rong said clearly, “The peach blossom shade leaves behind the divine sword, the jade ocean current gives life to the jade flute!’ I am surnamed Huang.”

Mei Chaofeng was even more startled and could only stammer, “You... You... You...”

Huang Rong called out, “You what? The east China sea Taohua Island snapping finger, the pure sound of the cave, the green bamboo forest, the Trial Sword Pavilion, you also remember?”

Mei Chaofeng knew these places from her discipleship and when she heard them mentioned now, a sudden thought came to her and she asked, “Taohua Island’s Huang... Shifu Huang, is...is...What is he to you?”

Huang Rong said, “Since you have not forgotten my father, he has not forgotten you, either. He is coming to look for you!”

Mei Chaofeng wanted to turn around and flee but how could she move a foot even one step? Frightened out of her wits and shocked, she could only clench her teeth, making a grating sound. She did not know what to do.

Huang Rong called out, “Quickly release him.”

Mei Chaofeng suddenly remembered, “Shifu swore that he would never leave Taohua Island, how could he be here? It was only because of this that I and ‘My Bastard’ stole the Nine Yin Manual. He made an oath and could not leave the island to pursue us. This person is trying to deceive me. I won't let myself get confused.”

When Huang Rong saw her hesitate, her left foot pointed downwards as she leapt up ten feet and successively executed two half-circles before soaring into the air and

wielding a palm towards Mei Chaofeng's head, intending to hit her. It was the 'Fallen Hero Divine Sword Palm' [Luo Ying Shen Jian Zhang], a pillar move of the 'River Town Flying Blossom' [Jiang Cheng Fei Hua]. She called out, "My father taught you this move. Have you forgotten it?"

Mei Chaofeng heard the noise of the air rustling around her but she kept still, her suspicions still in place, though she raised her hand and softly called out, "Shi Mei [Apprentice Sister], you have spoken with Shifu?" Huang Rong let her body drop, using one hand to pull and then drag Guo Jing to her side.

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Huang Rong was the Peach Blossom Island Master Huang Yaoshi's only daughter. Before giving birth to her, her mother became ill which caused her to be physically and mentally exhausted and this led to her death after a difficult labor. Huang Yaoshi, in a fit of extreme grief, expelled all his disciples from the island, leaving the father and daughter alone there.

Huang Yaoshi was called 'Eastern Heretic' [Dong Xie] because of his peculiar conduct. He often said that the etiquette and customs of the world were nonsense. His love for his daughter was excessive and he naturally did nothing to control her and allowed her to become arrogant and willful. Although she was highly intelligent, she was not willing to focus her mind on learning martial arts. Her father had proficient knowledge of yin and yang and the five elements, and the methods from of calculating them. She was able to learn while still very young but even though her father had already reached a divine level, she was nevertheless unable to get beyond the basic Taohua Island martial arts. One day, she was playing on the island when she came upon her father's enemy imprisoned in a cave.

Feeling lonely, she talked with that person for almost half a day. That person's words were interesting to her so she returned often, seeking him out to speak with him and find relief from loneliness. Later, Huang Yaoshi found out and reproached her severely. Huang Rong had never been beaten or scolded by her father so she reacted with anger and self-pity. Her cunning and unreasonable temperament manifested itself suddenly and she took a boat to escape Taohua Island, thinking that no one cared for her there. Thus, she cut her ties to it and disguised herself as a poor, disorderly, miserable youth, wandering in all directions, though her heart was still with her father. She thought angrily, "Since you don't love me, then I will make the world feel pity for a young beggar." However, she did not count on meeting Guo Jing in Zhangjiakou [Kalgan]. At first, she went to the restaurant with him to spend his money and cause a disturbance, intending to displace her resentment towards her father on him. Who would have thought that he would be so dumb as to have no suspicions at all and talked with her as though they were old friends and showed his concern by giving her his horse. She was bitter and lonely and thought about how she had deceived him, while he continued to treat her honestly. She was touched. Since then, the two became good friends.

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Huang Rong once listened to her father speak about Chen Xuanfeng and Mei Chaofeng's affair in great detail and because of this, she learned Mei Chaofeng's maiden name and the lines: 'The peach blossom leaves behind the divine sword, the jade green sea gives life to the jade flute', which was the heretical couplet that hung inside the Sword Trial Pavilion and embodied the principles of Huang Yaoshi's wugong. Every Peach Blossom Island disciple knew this. Since she knew that her kung fu could not rival Mei

Chaofeng's, she lied and told her that her father was coming. As a result, Mei Chaofeng was frightened into releasing Guo Jing.

Mei thought, "If Shifu is indeed coming, how do I know that he won't kill me?" She remembered that Huang Yaoshi had a ruthless nature and his methods were cruel. She could not stop her face from growing ashen and her whole body shook as though Huang Yaoshi, his face grim, was already standing in front of her. Her body became limp. It was as though she had lost her kung fu skills as she bent towards the ground and shakily said, "Disciple's many sins make her deserving of death. But I beseech Shifu to take pity because my two eyes are blind and my lower body is handicapped. Please grant disciple leniency even though disciple is no better than a swine or a dog." Then she remembered how Huang Yaoshi used to treat her with favor. Fearing that his heart had changed, her bosom was filled with shame as she said, "No, Shifu does not need to be lenient. Punish me severely."

The whole time Guo Jing was with her, she appeared to be fierce and her manner evil. Even when faced with a great enemy or when climbing up that steep precipice, she remained unfazed as though nothing mattered. However, when Huang Rong mentioned her father, her attitude changed unexpectedly which he found very strange. Huang Rong was laughing inside as she pulled Guo Jing by the hand and led him towards the outside wall. But before they could leap over it to escape, they were stopped by a clear voice. Chuckling softly, a person came holding a fan. He laughed, "Girl, I'm not certain you can manage to climb that."

Huang Rong saw that it was Ouyang Ke. She knew his kung fu skills and knew that it would be difficult to get past him. So, she immediately turned to Mei Chaofeng and said, "Mei



Shizi [Elder Martial Sister Mei], father is always willing to listen to me. I can ask favor for you. But first, you have to do something meritorious so father can forgive you."

Mei Chaofeng asked, "What is it?"

Huang Rong said, "There's a bad person who wants to bully me. I will pretend to go along but you mustn't allow the enemy to strike or beat me. Once father comes and sees you helping me, he'll be pleased."

Mei Chaofeng, hearing that her younger apprentice sister was willing to ask her father for a favor, felt her spirits revive. As they spoke, four of Ouyang Ke's concubines arrived. Huang Rong dragged Guo Jing behind Mei Chaofeng to avoid getting in the way, waiting for Mei Chaofeng or Ouyang Ke to make opening moves and then take the opportunity to sneak off. Ouyang Ke saw Mei Chaofeng sitting on the ground, her hair disheveled and her skin covered with dirt. She tightly clutched the upper part of her bosom. Opening his fan lightly and moving forward to catch Huang Rong, he suddenly felt a force heading towards his chest. He looked down to find the woman on the ground stretching out her hand to grab him. He had never encountered such level of strength in one stance before. Shocked, he hastily struck towards her wrist with his fan and at the same time, leapt aside. He heard a mocking sound, a noise, and loud successive cries. The front piece of Ouyang Ke's jacket was torn, his fan broken in two, and his four concubines were collapsing to the ground. He took a quick look around and saw that all four women had been killed violently. Their spirits left their bodies as soon as they were hit. The tops of their heads were covered with blood and brain matter oozed out of five holes. The swiftness and viciousness of the move was extremely rare. Ouyang Ke was surprised and angry at the same time when he saw the woman still sitting motionless as though

paralyzed. His fear lessened and he quickly launched a stance passed on by his family, the 'Divine Camel Snowy Mountain Palm' [Shen Tuo Xue Shan Zhang]. His body floated as his palm prepared to attack. Mei Chaofeng's ten finger nails were sharp, each poised to grab and squeeze the air out of him as she sneered at him. How could Ouyang Ke dare get close?

Just as Huang Rong pulled Guo Jing so they could walk away, they suddenly heard a mad roar coming from behind them. Hou Tonghai's two fists were headed towards them. Huang Rong leaned slightly to one side. When Hou Tonghai saw this, he aimed for her shoulders, feeling pleased with himself. His blunt brain did not function fast enough and he belatedly remembered that she was wearing the soft hedgehog armor. He let out a loud shout, hastily withdrew his two fists, and hit his own forehead above the three bumps, yelling out in pain. Where else could he grab her besides her hair? At that moment, Sha Tongtian, Liang Ziwong, and Peng Lianhu arrived. Liang Ziwong saw Ouyang Ke engaged in a vicious fight, his long gown torn and ragged, and realized that the woman was the same one who pretended to be a ghost in the cave. Roaring angrily, he went forward to attack. Sha Tongtian and the others noted that Mei Chaofeng's stances were fierce. They were astonished and so decided to keep close watch, waiting for the first opportunity to attack. They thought, "Where does this woman's high kung fu come from?" Peng Lianhu watched and figured it out, he shouted, "The 'Twin Killers of the Dark Winds'!"

Huang Rong's body moved swiftly, first darting to the east before flashing to the west. How could Hou Tonghai grab her hair? Huang Rong noticed that his hands were always aimed at the top of her head and was able to surmise his intentions. She darted towards the rose bushes and hid

behind them. She removed her long two-pronged hairpin and inserted it up from the base of the bun in her hair. Then she poked her head out and called, "I'm over here!"

Hou Tonghai was greatly pleased, and sent out a hand to grab the top of her head as he said, "This time, you can't get away, smelly boy...Ai yo, ai yo! Shi Ge (Martial Brother), the smelly boy's head also has thorns...thorns!" His palm had been punctured by the metal tips of the hairpin and caused him to jump back in pain.

Huang Rong laughingly said, "Your head has three horns. It's not fair. I only have two horns. Let's do this again!"

Hou Tonghai replied, "No, not again!"

Sha Tongtian scolded, "Do not shout!" Then he hurried over to his side to help.

By this time, Mei Chaofeng was engaging two masters who were attacking together. Suddenly, she sent her arm back to grab Guo Jing's chest, calling out, "Hold my legs." Guo Jing did not understand what she meant but he wanted to help her fight the two powerful enemies. At her words, he immediately bent down and grabbed her legs.

Mei Chaofeng used her left hand to resist Ouyang Ke's palm while her right hand thrust towards Liang Ziwong. She said to Guo Jing, "Carry me to that old man Liang!"

Guo Jing suddenly understood, "Her lower body cannot move. She wants me to help her." Thereupon he placed Mei Chaofeng on his shoulders and hurried after the fleeing enemy. His body had a strong kung fu basis and Mei Chaofeng's body was not heavy so even though she was on his shoulders, it did nothing to diminish his speed. He quickly leapt forward and Mei Chaofeng soared along with him.

Mei Chaofeng did not forget about the nei gong secret so even though she was facing the enemy, she also asked, "When you practice nei gong, how is it done?"

Guo Jing replied, "Sit cross-legged with five hearts facing heaven."

Mei Chaofeng asked, "What does five hearts facing heaven mean?"

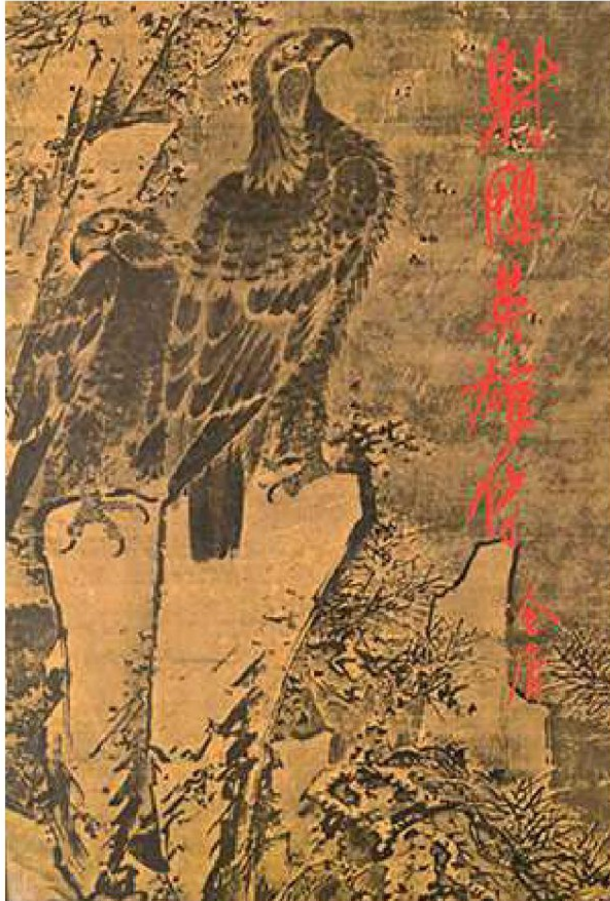
Guo Jing said, "The center of two palms, the center of two soles of the feet, and the center of the crown of the head – these are the five hearts." Mei Chaofeng was delighted and her spirits rose. She reached out to brush the shoulders of Liang Ziwong, whose heart jumped as he started and ran away.

Guo Jing was about to chase after him when suddenly the Dragon King Sha Tongtian ran in front of him to help his apprentice brother capture Huang Rong. Startled, he hastily carried Mei Chaofeng towards them, shouting, "First, let's take care of these two!" Mei Chaofeng stretched out her left arm, heading towards Hou Tonghai. Hou Tonghai anxiously withdrew, trying to dodge. Who would think that Mei Chaofeng's arm would be so violent as though it had the strength of an ape? Although Hou Tonghai's dodging was quick, her arm was still able to follow his body. Grabbing him, the fingers of her right hand were already digging into him. Hou Tonghai's entire body went numb. He could no longer move.

He shouted, "Spare my life, spare my life, I have surrendered!"

End of Book 1

**She Diao Ying Xiong Chuan**  
**Eagle Shooting Hero Book 02**  
by  
**Jin Yong**



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by  
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Additionally, I would note that the work involved goes far beyond just translation.

Chinese cannot simply be directly translated to English, so am grateful for the notes explaining idioms in addition to notes on geography, culture and historical context.

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# Chapter 11 - Changchun Admits Defeat

Translated by James Worsley



*On the eighth day, Guo Jing finally managed to reach the peak. Stretching out his hand, he*

*hauled Huang Rong up and they jumped up and down in jubilation, delirious in their triumph. Then, hand-in-hand, they slid down the waterfall once more.*

Seeing his martial brother in critical danger, Sha Tongtian leapt over to quickly try and break Mei Chaofeng's grip. As soon as their hands met they both felt their arms struck by a sudden ache. Meanwhile over to their left came the sound of darts whizzing through the air. Peng Lianhu was throwing his darts directly at Mei Chaofeng. She deftly shifted her arm and threw Hou Tonghai straight towards the stream of darts. "Aiyo!" yelled Hou Tonghai as the darts smacked into his body.

Huang Rong called out "Congratulations Three-Horned Dragon! You managed to catch so many darts!"

Sha Tongtian, seeing the amazing power of Mei Chaofeng's throw and his martial brother down on the ground seriously injured, leaped towards Hou Tonghai and with a stretch of his hand pulled him upright. Hou Tonghai flew up like a paper sparrow but looked as if he would collapse again. There was no strength left in his body. Sha Tongtian had accidentally hit his three carbuncles.

All these events happened within a blink of an eye. While this was going on Ouyang Ke and Liang Ziwong were attacking Mei Chaofeng from the front and rear in concert with Sha Tongtian who was attacking from the right.

Mei Chaofeng was able to judge from the sound of the darts in the air where they were. She sent them flying back in four directions towards Ouyang, Liang, Sha and Peng. She asked Guo Jing "What does 'Gather the Five Elements' mean?"

Guo Jing replied "The eastern ghost is wood, the western soul is metal, the southern spirit is fire, the northern essence is water and the central will is earth."

Mei Chaofeng called out "Aiyo! I might have guessed that earlier! What does the 'Perform the Four Harmonious Signs' mean?"

Guo Jing replied, "Hide the eyes, concentrate the hearing, regulate the breath and seal the tongue Qi."

Mei Chaofeng sighed, "Ah, so that is the original meaning. What about the 'Five Primary Chambers'?"

Again Guo Jing replied, "Don't use your eyes to see, rather locate your soul in the liver; don't use your ears to listen, rather locate your essence in the kidneys; don't use your mouth to chant, rather locate your spirit in the heart; don't use your nose to smell, rather locate your soul in your lungs; don't move with your four limbs, rather locate your mind/concentration in your spleen. These are the 'Five Primary Chambers'."

The 'Four Harmonious Signs' and 'Five Primary Chambers' were key techniques contained in the 'Nine Yin Manual' practiced by Taoist priests. Not having anyone to explain the meanings of these key phrases to her, Mei Chaofeng had struggled without success for over ten years to understand them. Now with Guo Jing's explanations she suddenly understood everything and was delighted. Again she pressed for more information "Now, how do I perform the 'Gathering Three Flower Tops'. This technique was the crucial key to putting everything together. She had strived all those years for just this key point so she listened intently for Guo Jing's answer.



Guo Jing replied, "Essence is transformed into Qi, Qi is transformed into Spirit....."

Mei Chaofeng, by concentrating on Guo Jing's words, became less attentive to the fight and her four opponents. Just as Guo Jing was saying the two sentences she was struck on her left shoulder and right side by Ouyang Ke and Sha Tongtian's fists. She felt a severe pain that was hard to bear.

Huang Rong had planned to have Mei Chaofeng obstruct their enemies in a fight while she and Guo Jing took the opportunity to slip away. She never expected that Guo Jing would be dragged into the fight as well by becoming a conveyance to carry Mei into the battle. This made it impossible for them to get away. Now she became both worried and angry.

Meanwhile Mei Chaofeng was becoming alarmed at being suddenly put on the defensive and called out, "Hey! What did you do to annoy so many fierce opponents? Where is Shifu?" At this time Mei Chaofeng's thoughts were conflicting. On the one hand she was hoping her old Shifu would appear and see with his own eyes how she was helping to save his daughter from the savage onslaught of these four highly skilled martial artists and would leap in to help her dispatch them. On the other hand, when she thought about how wild and strange his nature was, she was struck with terror at the thought of meeting him again.

Huang Rong called out, "He's coming soon, but why worry...these guys are no match for you. Even if you just sit on the ground none of them would be able to harm a hair on your head." She was hoping that with a bit of flattery Mei Chaofeng would feel emboldened enough to let Guo Jing go and fight it out alone. However Mei Chaofeng had already begun to feel that she would not be able to manage

the four opponents by herself. She was already showing signs of despair and no amount of flattery was going to make her change her mind. Further more, she still had a few more questions to ask Guo Jing about the secrets of the manual and was not about to let him go even if she could win the fight sitting alone on the ground.

After a few more strikes were exchanged, Liang Ziwong leaped into the air with a sudden cry. Mei Chaofeng knew someone was executing a sneak attack and extended both arms to block and sweep in defense. She felt her hair being pulled upwards by Liang Ziwong. Huang Rong saw the situation was critical and struck outwards with her fist towards Liang Ziwong's back. Liang Ziwong hooked his right hand backwards and grabbed Huang Rong's wrist while maintaining his grip on Mei Chaofeng's hair. Mei Chaofeng struck upwards and forced Liang Ziwong to release his grip in order to avoid being hit by her powerful attack.

Peng Lianhu had been fighting with Mei Chaofeng for a while before he became aware that she was actually one of the 'Twin Killers of the Dark Winds'. Seeing Huang Rong aiding her he called out, "You lying brat! You denied that you are a disciple of the evil 'Dark Winds' sect but it's obvious that you are!"

Huang Rong laughed, "She...my Shifu? Even if she trained for another hundred years she still wouldn't be good enough to become my Shifu!"

Peng Lianhu saw clearly that Huang Rong's kung fu attacks were very similar to those of the 'Dark Wind's' school yet she not only continued to deny she was a disciple, but actually went so far as to insult Mei Chaofeng. He couldn't think of why she would be doing this and it astonished him.

Sha Tongtian yelled, "To kill the man, first shoot his horse!" and shot a kick towards Guo Jing with his right foot. This change of tactics took Mei Chaofeng off guard. She thought, "This kid's martial arts skills are very low. He can't possibly defend himself against their attacks. If I don't act fast I'll be dispatched by them." There was the sound of a low whistle as she bent low and shot out her hand as if to grab Sha Tongtian's foot. Ouyang Ke took advantage of this moment to launch an attack against her back. However Mei Chaofeng just let out a 'humph' and shook her right hand causing something to flash in the moonlight. All of a sudden a silver whip appeared, dancing and weaving all around her and Guo Jing, forming an impenetrable barrier.

Peng Lianhu thought to himself, "If we don't kill her now, when her husband, 'Copper Corpse' arrives, we will be in deep trouble!" The events of that night when Chen Xuanfeng died had not become known in the martial world. However the infamy of the 'Twin Killers of the Dark Winds' was widely known and their reputation was such that even highly respected martial artists such as himself were filled with dread at the thought of facing both of them together.

Mei Chaofeng's 'Poison Silver Dragon Whip' was powerful in the extreme. If anyone approached from any direction they would die instantly. But Sha Tongtian, Peng Lianhu, Liang Ziwing and Ouyang Ke were not about to give up so easily. Suddenly there was the sound of a whistle and Peng Lianhu began tunneling in the ground! Mei Chaofeng was prepared to defend against the sky and all four directions but not from below! At the sound of digging she became greatly alarmed and struck a palm down on the ground.

Seeing Guo Jing in danger, Huang Rong was about to rush to his aid but Mei Chaofeng was one step quicker. Using her long Silver Whip, she had already woven a defensive barrier around herself and Guo Jing, making it impossible

for Huang Rong or anyone to penetrate it. However, Huang Rong knew that with Mei Chaofeng's individual might alone, she would not be able to successfully defend against Peng Lianhu's attack for much longer. Sensing that the situation was dire, Huang Rong yelled, "Everyone hold it, I have something to say." But Peng Lianhu of course paid no heed to her. Why should he?

Huang Rong was preparing to raise her voice again when a voice from atop the wall said, "Everyone hold it, I have something to say." Huang Rong turned her head and saw six figures on top of the wall, some tall, some short and in the darkness, she could not make out their faces clearly. Peng Lianhu and the others knew that some people had arrived, but did not know if they were friend or foe. At present, the battle was growing ever more intense and nobody could bring themselves to stop. Two people leapt down from the wall and headed straight for Ouyang Ke; one waving a whip and the other raising a staff.

The short plump man that held the whip exclaimed, "You lecher, let's see you escape this time!" Upon hearing this voice, Guo Jing yelled gladly, "Shifu! Save me!" The six people that just arrived were the "Six Freaks' of Jiangnan'.

After parting from Guo Jing at the inn, the 'Freaks' had followed the eight girls from the 'White Camel Mountain'. When they discovered that Ouyang Ke was leading his concubines to abduct innocent girls at night, they fought him. After all, how could the "Six Freaks' of Jiangnan' sit by and do nothing while such atrocities were being committed? Although Ouyang Ke was highly-skilled, the "Six Freaks" had spent more than a decade on the steppe working hard and had improved significantly since they left the Central Plains. Surrounded by six fighters, Ouyang Ke was hit by Ke Zhen'E's staff and subsequently had his left little finger dislocated, courtesy of Zhu Cong's Bone

Dislocation technique. Left with no choice, Ouyang Ke was forced to leave the abducted girls behind and flee. The two concubines that had accompanied Ouyang Ke on the mission, however, were killed by Nan Xiren and Quan Jinfa.

After escorting the teenage girls back to their homes, the “Six Freaks” went in pursuit of Ouyang Ke. But Ouyang Ke was extremely sly; he took another route and therefore, the “Six Freaks” were unable to locate him. They knew that, individually, none of them were his match, so they did not dare to split up to search. Fortunately, the girls who rode on white camels had a strange and distinct dress, so it was not difficult to ask around for their whereabouts. This being so, the “Six Freaks” pursued them all the way to the Zhao Palace.

Ouyang Ke’s white robes stood out in the darkness and Han Baoju together with Nan Xiren attacked immediately. Hearing Guo Jing’s call, the “Six Freaks” were both surprised and glad. Zhu Cong and the rest looked more closely and saw that the person weaving the barrier with a long silver whip was none other than ‘Iron Corpse’, Mei Chaofeng! Mei was sitting on Guo Jing’s shoulder and it certainly looked like Guo Jing had fallen into her clutches. With their faces pale with shock, Han Xiaoying immediately brandished her sword and rushed forward as Quan Jinfa tumbled into the silver whip’s defensive radius, both hoping to rescue Guo Jing. Peng Lianhu and the others thought it strange that six people should suddenly arrive. Now these six people were attacking both Ouyang Ke and Iron Corpse, making it even more impossible to tell whose side they were on.

Peng Lianhu halted his attack and, still using his ‘Earthen Palm’, got out of the whip’s radius. “Everyone stop fighting, I have something to say,” he shouted. Like a large booming

bell, his shout rang loudly in everyone's ears. Liang Ziwing and Sha Tongtian were the first to stop fighting.

Ke Zhen'E could tell from his shout that this person was a force to be reckoned with and called out, "Third brother, seventh sister, don't be rash!"

Hearing their Eldest brother's orders, Han Baoju and the rest backed off. Mei Chaofeng had also withdrawn her silver whip and was breathing hard. Huang Rong stepped forward and told her, "You have reaped much credit for yourself this time. My father will be pleased." Using both arms, she motioned to Guo Jing, telling him to toss Mei Chaofeng away.

Guo Jing understood Huang Rong, and knew that she had spoken to Mei Chaofeng to distract her. He said to her, "The 'Three Flowers Gathered Atop' is Essence transformed into Qi, Qi transformed into Spirit, Spirit transformed into Nothingness. Remember that!"

Mei Chaofeng pondered, then asked: "How does one transform?" Suddenly, she felt her body soaring through the air. While she had been dwelling on the deeper meanings of this nei gong (internal energy) mantra, Guo Jing had used the opportunity to toss her more than ten feet away. At the same time, he summoned his internal energy and leapt backwards; even before he landed, Mei's 'Poison Silver Dragon Whip' was already flying towards him, its hooks sparkling brightly.

Han Baoju exclaimed, "Not good!" He unleashed his own whip and the two whips met. Suffering waves of shock from the extremely close encounter, Han Baoju's whip was snatched by her Poison Silver Dragon Whip. Just as Mei Chaofeng was about to land hard on the ground, her outstretched palm met it first and she lightly seated herself.

Having heard Ke Zhen'E's voice and fighting briefly with Han Xiaoying, she knew the 'Seven Freaks of Jiangnan' must have arrived. Her heart was filled with loathing and, at the same time, a little fear. She thought to herself, "I have searched in vain for them everywhere and now they have delivered themselves to me. If it were any other day, I would've thanked the heavens, but on this night I am surrounded by other strong enemies and found them hard to handle. With the addition of these seven scoundrels, I cannot possibly hope to live past tonight." She gritted her teeth and decided: "I have no grudge with Liang Ziwing and the others. As for the 'Seven Freaks', I will fight them to the death and make sure that if I perish, they perish with me. One dead 'Freak' makes one less and I'll take as many as I can with me." Gripping her Poison Silver Dragon Whip, she listened carefully to the 'Seven Freaks' movements and wondered, "Out of seven only six came, I wonder where the other is hiding?" She did not know that the Smiling Buddha, Zhang Ahsheng, had been killed by her husband on that fateful night on the steppes.

The 'Six Freaks', Sha Tongtian and the others knew the power of her silver whip and stood far away from her, being careful not to stray within forty to fifty feet of her. For a moment, all was silent. Zhu Cong whispered to Guo Jing: "Why are they fighting? Why were you helping that wretch?"

Guo Jing replied: "They wanted to kill me, but she saved me." But Zhu Cong and the other Freaks remained puzzled.

Peng Lianhu called out: "What business do you have, sneaking into the Palace in the middle of the night? Provide your names."

Ke Zhen'E replied coldly: "My surname is Ke. We are seven brothers, and people call us the 'Seven Freaks of

Jiangnan’.”

Peng Lianhu said, “Ah, so it is the Seven Heroes from Jiangnan. I have long admired you.”

Sha Tongtian said in a strange voice: “Wonderful, the ‘Seven Freaks’ have come knocking on my door! I have long wanted to spar with you and see just how good you are.”

After hearing the name ‘Seven Freaks of Jiangnan’, he immediately remembered the shame his four disciples had suffered. In one swift movement, he moved forward. Appraising the ‘Seven Freaks’, he saw that Ke Zhen’E was blind, Han Xiaoying was a woman, Quan Jinfa was skin and bones, Han Baoju was short and fat and Zhu Cong had the air of someone cultured but not of a pugilist. Only Nan Xiren had the bold, proud qualities of a fighter. Not wanting to waste his time on the rest, he struck straight at Nan Xiren’s head. Nan Xiren stuck his pole in the ground and met Sha Tongtian’s palm with his own. After a few moves, it was clear that Nan Xiren was not his match. Han Xiaoying and Quan Jinfa readied their weapons, sword and scale respectively, and rushed forward to help.

With a roar, Peng Lianhu leapt towards Quan Jinfa and attempted to grab his weapon. Sensing Peng Lianhu’s intentions, Quan Jinfa quickly drew back his weapon and sent both ends of it – a scale mace and scale hook, flying towards Peng. For all of Peng Lianhu’s experience in the martial world, he had never seen anything like Quan Jinfa’s weapon before. With a ‘Weird Python Flip’, he dodged Quan’s attack and exclaimed: “What is this? You’re using a scale from the market as a weapon!”

Quan Jinfa retorted, “This hand scale of mine is for weighing you bunch of skinny pigs!”



In a fit of anger, Peng Lianhu rushed forward striking with both palms furiously. Quan Jinfa was, of course, unable to defeat his attack. Seeing his Sixth brother in danger, Han Baoju quickly went to his aid. Even though he no longer had his whip, his basic hand-to-hand ability was still quite powerful. However, even at two against one, Peng Lianhu still seemed almost impossible to handle. Ke Zhen'E maneuvered his staff, Zhu Cong brandished his fan, and both joined in the battle. Ke Zhen'E and Zhu Cong were much more powerful than the rest of their group, so naturally with their addition, the battle tipped in the Freaks' favor. Over on the other side, the battle between Hou Tonghai and Huang Rong had grown extremely intense. Hou Tonghai's kung fu was by rights better than hers, but when he thought of this rascal's Soft Hedgehog Armor and the thorns that resided in her hair, his fist and palm strikes did not dare come into contact with her body, much less grab her by her hair. Sensing his fear and hesitation, Huang Rong took full advantage and charged about brashly, forcing him to back away repeatedly.

Hou Tonghai shouted: "This is unfair. Take off your Soft Hedgehog Armor before we continue fighting."

Huang Rong replied: "Sure, but you must first slice off those three lumps on your forehead, if not then it's still unfair."

Hou Tonghai retorted: "My three lumps do not hurt anyone!"

Huang Rong replied, "I feel disgusted when I see them, isn't that giving you have a huge advantage? On the count of three, you slice off your lumps and I'll take off my armor."

Hou Tonghai replied angrily: "I will not!"

Huang Rong said, "It's a very good trade-off, I think you should."

Hou Tonghai exclaimed, "I will not fall for your tricks. I won't slice them off no matter what you say!"

Ouyang Ke saw that the battle was not going well and thought, "I'll kill these six scoundrels first. That wretch is unable to escape so we can finish her off later." Wanting to show off his skills, he pointed both feet and displayed his family's 'Thousand Miles in a Flash', a superior qing gong technique, and promptly appeared beside Ke Zhen'E.

He shouted, "Blind scoundrel, I'll let you have a taste of your master's prowess for being such a busybody."

Moving forward, Ouyang Ke struck out with his right palm. Ke Zhen'E raised the end of his staff to meet the strike but caught nothing, only the sound of wind brushing past his right ear. Instead, the real attack came from the left with Ouyang Ke's reverse left palm flying towards him. Ke Zhen'E dipped his head to avoid being struck and then used the 'Diamond Guard' staff technique to fiercely attack, but by this time, Ouyang Ke was embroiled with Nan Xiren. Skillfully weaving his way through them, Ouyang Ke had attempted fatal blows on all six Freaks within a short period of time.

From the beginning, Liang Ziwong's eyes never shifted from Guo Jing. Seeing that the 'Six Freaks' defeat was imminent, he immediately tried to grab Guo Jing with both arms. Guo Jing quickly resisted, but of course he was not Liang Ziwong's match. After exchanging a few moves, Liang Ziwong had successfully grabbed him by the chest and his right hand gripped Guo Jing's stomach. Guo Jing shrunk his stomach in anxiety and his clothes tore with a ripping sound and the bags of medicine had been snatched away. Liang

Ziwong knew the bags contained medicine, he'd sniffed it out long ago and conveniently pocketed them. He followed with a second strike on Guo Jing. Guo Jing successfully struggled out of the grip on his chest and sprinted towards Mei Chaofeng, yelling, "Hey! Save me, quickly!"

Mei Chaofeng thought to herself, "There are still many things I don't understand about that mysterious school of nei gong." Still breathing hard, she said aloud: "Come, take hold my legs; don't be afraid of that old bat."

Guo Jing knew that holding her legs was easy, but to escape afterwards would be hard. So he did not dare to go close to her and instead sprinted wildly around her in circles. Although Guo Jing had already entered the perimeter of her 'Poison Silver Dragon Whip', Liang Ziwong still followed him relentlessly, nevertheless wary of a sneak attack. Mei Chaofeng pinpointed Guo Jing's position with her hearing and unleashed her silver whip across the ground towards his legs.

Although Huang Rong was engaged in a duel with Hou Tonghai, she held the upper hand with her Soft Hedgehog Armor and had always been looking out for Guo Jing. First he was captured by Liang Ziwong but she was too far away to help and was anxious to the extreme. Then Guo Jing sprinted into Mei Chaofeng's perimeter. Her whip flew towards him and he was unable to dodge. Out of anxiety, Huang Rong flew in their direction and threw herself in front of the whip. Mei Chaofeng's silver whip withdrew after hitting a target and circled back, wrapping itself around Huang Rong's waist. Huang Rong was thrown up into the air and shouted: "You dare hurt me, Mei Ruohua?"

Hearing Huang Rong's voice gave her a huge shock. She thought, "My whip is tipped with reversed hooks. Now that I've injured her, Shifu has even more reason not to spare

me. But I have already come this far, and either way I have betrayed my school. I'll kill her first." Raising her silver whip, she pulled Huang Rong closer to her and laid her on the ground, thinking that all the hooks must have torn deep into her flesh by now. She never expected the hooks to only tear Huang Rong's clothing, leaving her body completely unharmed. Huang Rong said laughingly, "You tore my clothes, I want compensation!"

Mei Chaofeng was surprised to hear no hint of pain in her voice then thought, "Ah, Shifu has given his Soft Hedgehog Armor to her." Feeling lenient, she said aloud, "That was my fault. I will replace them with a nice new set of clothing."

Huang Rong signaled Guo Jing to come over and he did so. The two of them now stood ten feet or so from Mei Chaofeng, where Liang Ziwong did not dare to venture.

Over at the other battle, the "Six Freaks" of Jiangnan had formed a tight circle with their backs towards each other and were trying their best to resist Sha Tongtian, Peng Lianhu, Ouyang Ke and Hou Tonghai. This was a formation they had mastered on the steppes of Mongolia. When faced with tough opponents, this formation made it unnecessary for them to defend their backs and instantly increased their power by half. But Sha, Peng and Ouyang were simply too strong and danger came from all directions; the "Six Freaks" were far from being their match. Not long after, Han Baoju's arm was injured. Han Baoju knew that if he left the formation there would be an opening for their opponents to exploit and their lives and Guo Jing's would be in grave danger. He could only grit his teeth and hold on with great effort.

Of their opponents, Peng Lianhu was the most vicious in his attacks and repeatedly targeted Han Baoju. Guo Jing saw that the situation was urgent and rushed towards them

with flying feet. With the double palm technique 'Separating Cloud and Moon', he aimed for Peng Lianhu's back. Peng Lianhu let out a chilling laugh and with a wave of his hand deflected Guo Jing's attack. In just three moves, Guo Jing found himself in a dangerous position.

Huang Rong saw that he was unable to escape and in her anxiety suddenly remembered the saying: 'A simple man is sinless, but a man wearing a piece of jade will be sinned against.' So, she yelled: "Mei Chaofeng, you stole my father's 'Nine Yin Manual', hand it to me now so I can return it to him!"

Mei Chaofeng went cold and did not respond. Sha Tongtian, Peng Lianhu, Ouyang Ke and Liang Ziwong immediately shifted their attention to Mei Chaofeng and attacked her. All four harbored the same thought, "The 'Nine Yin Manual' is the world's top martial arts manual and it's been with the 'Twin Killers of the Dark Winds' all along..." Now the four couldn't care less about anything else and their focus was to kill Mei Chaofeng and obtain the manual.

Mei Chaofeng began brandishing her silver whip and for the moment, none of them dared to venture within its perimeter. Seeing them lured away by the 'Nine Yin Manual', Huang Rong whispered to Guo Jing urgently, "Let's go!"

At this moment, a figure emerged from a thicket and hurried towards them. It shouted, "Gentlemen! Father requires your help with something urgent." The person wore a gold cap crookedly on his head and his voice was filled with worry. It was none other than the young prince, Wanyan Kang. Peng Lianhu and the others thought, "Prince Zhao has been generous in exchange for our services. Now that there is something urgent, how can we not go to his aid?" With this thought they backed off reluctantly, not

wanting to give up the 'Nine Yin Manual'. Their gaze still lingered on Mei Chaofeng.

Wanyan Kang said softly: "My mother... my mother has been abducted by villains. Father has requested that you help to rescue her, please start at once."

Originally, Wanyan Honglie had led his troops out of the Palace to chase Bao Xiruo, but they lost sight of her. Remembering the resourceful martial artists in his residence, he hurriedly sent his son to summon them. Wanyan Kang was caught up in anxiety and the night was dark, so he did not notice Mei Chaofeng seated on the ground.

Peng Lianhu and the others thought, "Oh my, the Consort has been abducted? If we don't go to her rescue, what are we here for?" They further thought, "It must have been the 'Seven Freaks'. Six of them kept us here to distract us, allowing the other to abduct the Consort. The manual will have to wait. Anyway, with so many accomplished fighters around, I can't hope to claim it for myself. I'll need to come up with a plan some other time." With that, they hurriedly followed Wanyan Kang. Liang Ziwong trailed behind, still longing for the blood in Guo Jing's body. He actually didn't care about rescuing the Consort but was alone in wanting to stay behind and had no choice but to follow miserably.

Guo Jing called, "Hey, return my medicine!" Fuming, Liang Ziwong turned and shot a bone-penetrating projectile straight at his head. The projectile cut through the night air with incredible strength.

Zhu Cong dashed forward and deflected the projectile with the handle of his fan. As the projectile fell, he caught it with his left hand and held it to his nose to have a sniff. "Ah," he

said, "seals throats when it touches blood; this is a 'Bone-Penetrating Meridian Nail'.

Hearing the name of his secret weapon startled Liang Ziwong; he spun around and yelled, "What?"

Zhu Cong went up to him and held out his palm; the Meridian Nail was resting on it. He said lightly: "I'll give it back to you, old master!"

Liang Ziwong retrieved it calmly. He knew that with Zhu Cong's level of kung fu, he could not harm him. Zhu Cong saw that Liang Ziwong's left sleeve was covered with mud and grass and used his own sleeve to swipe the dirt away. Liang Ziwong said angrily, "I don't need your bootlicking!" With that, he turned around and left.

Guo Jing was in a miserable position. If he went back without the medicine, all the night's misadventures would have been for naught; but if he tried to regain it forcefully, he would undoubtedly be defeated by Liang Ziwong. He was still hesitating when Ke Zhen'E said, "Let's go." Ke Zhen'E leapt to the top of the Palace wall and the other five 'Freaks' followed suit.

Pointing at Mei Chaofeng, Han Xiaoying said: "Elder brother, what about her?"

Ke Zhen'E replied: "We promised Priest Ma to spare her life."

Huang Rong did not acknowledge the "Six Freaks" and leapt on to the other end of the wall, grinning.

Mei Chaofeng hollered: "Little martial sister, where is Shifu?"

Huang Rong giggled and said, "My father is, of course, on Peach Blossom Island, why do you ask? Are you going to pay

him a visit?"

Mei Chaofeng seethed, her breath growing heavier and quicker. After a moment she said, "Didn't you just say that Shifu was on his way here?"

Still laughing, Huang Rong replied, "He doesn't know you're here, but rest assured I'll tell him for you. I'm sure he'll come straight away. Don't worry, I'm not bluffing." Enraged, Mei Chaofeng braced herself with both hands and sprung up suddenly. With staggering steps, she charged towards Huang Rong.

Mei Chaofeng had lost the use of her legs as a result of intensely practicing a nei gong she didn't understand. A stream of Qi had flowed down to her 'dan tian' (energy field) and was unable to work its way back up, paralyzing her lower body. She had stubbornly attempted to work the Qi back upwards but the harder she tried, the stronger the resistance she met.

At this moment, her senses were consumed with fury, so much so that she forgot about her paralysis. She was in a state where she had disengaged from her body and was only aware of a violent surge of anger rushing up to her heart. Suddenly her legs had become part of her body again and she charged towards Huang Rong. Shocked that Mei Chaofeng had regained the use of her legs, Huang Rong leapt down to the other side and fled into the night.

Suddenly regaining the use of her legs, Mei Chaofeng thought, "Eh, how come I can walk now?" With this thought, a sudden wave of numbness washed over her legs and she fell, losing consciousness.

For the 'Six Freaks' to kill her now would be an easy task; but they had promised Ma Yu to spare her life. So they leapt over the wall and left the palace with Guo Jing.



Han Xiaoying was the most anxious and hurriedly asked, "Jing'er, how did you end up here?"

Guo Jing roughly sketched the events leading up to this point...Wang Chuyi coming to his rescue, getting poisoned at Wanyan Kang's banquet, stealing the medicine, bumping into Mei Chaofeng in the tunnel, et cetera. For the moment, however, he did not mention the Yang family saga.

Zhu Cong said, "Let's hurry and see how Priest Wang is coping."

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Having just been reunited with his wife, Yang Tiexin felt an inexpressible mixture of joy and sadness. Carrying her in his arms, he leapt out of the palace. His foster daughter Mu Nianci was anxiously waiting outside the palace walls when she saw him carrying a woman in his arms. Surprised and curious, she asked, "Father, who is she?"

Yang Tiexin replied, "She's your mother. Let's go."

Mu Nianci said, bewildered, "My mother?"

Yang Tiexin said, "Hush, we'll talk afterwards," and sprinted off urgently.

After a time, Bao Xiruo slowly regained consciousness. It was near daybreak and in the dim light, she saw that the person bearing her was the husband she had been thinking of day and night for eighteen years. She didn't know if it was real or just an illusion. She felt like she was in a dream and reached out to caress his face. Her voice quivered as she spoke, "Tie-ge, am I dead too?"

Crying joyfully, he replied in a gentle voice, "Both of us are alive and well..." His sentence was interrupted by shouts from behind. Light from torches lit the area as soldiers

quickly streamed forward. Raising their swords and spears, they yelled, "Don't let the Consort's kidnapper escape!"

Yang Tiexin quickly surveyed their surroundings but there was no place they could hide. He thought, "The heavens have pitied us husband and wife and allowed us to reunite against the odds. Even if I were to die now, I would have nothing left to wish for." He called to Mu Nianci, "Here, hold your mother."

The scene at Lin'an's Ox Village eighteen years ago suddenly sprang into Bao Xiruo's mind: her husband fleeing with her in his arms, the cries of soldiers in the night and the eighteen years of separation and grief that followed. Sensing that the tragedy was to repeat itself, she held on stubbornly to her husband, refusing to let go. The soldiers were getting near and Yang Tiexin thought it better to die fighting than be captured and humiliated. With that, he pried his wife's fingers away and entrusted her to Mu Nianci. Turning around, he charged towards the soldiers and with a fist, knocked out a foot soldier and seized his spear. With a spear in hand, Yang Tiexin was even more lethal. The troops' commander, Tang Zude, was speared in the leg and promptly fell off his horse. With their leader down, the rest of the soldiers scampered away in all directions. Seeing there were no skilled pugilists amongst them, Yang Tiexin felt slightly relieved even though it was a pity not to have been able to grab a horse. The three of them continued their escape.

By this time it was morning. Bao Xiruo noticed the bloodstains on her husband's clothes and said, frightened, "Are you hurt?"

Hearing this, Yang Tiexin was suddenly aware of a sharp pain in his arm. Because he had exerted too much strength during the fight, the wound from Wanyan Kang's claws had

re-opened and was now bleeding profusely again. Earlier he had been fixated with escaping and was not aware of the pain; but now both arms felt stiff and weak and he was unable to lift them. Bao Xiruo was about to bandage his wounds when loud calls came from behind and the dust from countless pursuing soldiers appeared. With a bitter smile, Yang Tiexin said, "No need to bandage." He turned and said to Mu Nianci, "Child, run for your life! Your mother and I will stay here..."

Mu Nianci successfully fought back tears and raised her head proudly, saying, "The three of us will die together."

Confused, Bao Xiruo asked, "How... how is she our daughter?"

Yang Tiexin was just about to answer when he heard the soldiers nearing. Looking up, he saw two Taoist priests coming towards them, one had a white beard and eyebrows and looked kindly; the other had a long black beard, a long sword slung on his back and looked grand and dignified. Great delight replaced his initial astonishment and Yang Tiexin called out, "Priest Qiu, we meet again!"

Of the two priests, one was 'Scarlet Sun' Ma Yu and the other was 'Eternal Spring' Qiu Chuji. The two of them, along with 'Jade Sun' Wang Chuyi, had arranged to meet in Zhongdu to discuss the upcoming duel with the 'Seven Freaks of Jiangnan'. Both had hurried here and chanced upon the Yangs. Qiu Chuji had an accomplished level of nei gong and thus his appearance had not changed much over the eighteen years. Only the hair on his temples was speckled with white. Hearing this greeting, he looked more closely, but it was someone he did not recognize.

Yang Tiexin said, "Eighteen years ago at Ox Village in Lin'an, we once drank and killed enemies together, do you

still remember?"

Qiu Chuji said, "You are..."

Yang Tiexin declared, "I'm Yang Tiexin, have you been well?" Yang approached him and bowed.

Qiu Chuji hurriedly returned the formality but still harbored some doubts. Eighteen years of hardship and grief had eroded his youthful appearance and Yang Tiexin looked vastly different than before. Yang Tiexin sensed his doubts but the soldiers were getting near and it was not a good time to clarify things in detail. Raising his spear, he displayed the 'Phoenix Striking Head'. The red tassel trembled as the spear headed for Qiu Chuji's chest and he said, "Priest Qiu, you may have forgotten me, but you can't have forgotten the 'Yang Family Spear'!"

The spear froze inches away from Qiu Chuji. Qiu Chuji saw that this was indeed the authentic Yang Family Spear and immediately recalled that night's fight in the snow; it was indeed Yang Tiexin from eighteen years ago and a bittersweet feeling washed over him. He said loudly, "Aha, brother Yang, you're still alive? Thank Heaven!"

Yang Tiexin withdrew his spear and said, "Priest Qiu, save me!" Qiu Chuji glanced at the approaching soldiers and said jovially, "Elder martial brother, I'm going to start killing again today, don't get angry!"

Ma Yu replied, "Kill less; maybe just scare them off."

Qiu Chuji laughed loudly and took a huge step forward. With a stretch of both arms, he plucked two soldiers off their horses and flung them towards another two soldiers behind. The four soldiers crashed against each other and fell in a heap. Qiu Chuji's arms moved at the speed of

lightning and, like a canon, fired eight more soldiers towards another eight.

Terrified, the other soldiers turned their horses and fled. Suddenly, a chiefly looking figure with a bald, shiny head emerged from behind the fleeing soldiers. He bellowed: "Where did this scoundrel come from?" With a slight sway of his body, he was already close to Qiu Chuji and attacked with his palms. Qiu Chuji noticed that this person was highly agile. Raising his palms to obstruct the attack, their palms met with a clap and subsequently both withdrew three paces. Surprised, Qiu Chuji thought to himself, "Who is this person with such good kung fu?"

Little did he know that the Dragon King of the Demonic Group Sha Tongtian was concealing the pain in his arms from their exchange and was even more surprised than he. With an angry roar, Sha Tongtian swung his fists forward. Qiu Chuji did not dare to be slow and with full strength and concentration sent both palms darting straight at Sha Tongtian. After exchanging ten moves or so, Qiu Chuji successfully brushed his palm against Sha Tongtian, leaving five streaks of red on his bald head. Though Sha Tongtian could not see the marks, he could feel a stinging pain from the top of his head. Knowing that he would not be able to beat this Taoist empty-handed, he immediately pulled an iron stick from behind him. Although this weapon was heavy, its power was great and with a "Reviving Qin Behind the Sword", the stick struck in the direction of Qiu Chuji's shoulder. Qiu Chuji greeted the attack with his technique of seizing weapons with bare hands. But Sha Tongtian had been using this weapon for more than ten years and had extraordinary skill with it, so Qiu Chuji failed in his attempt.

Deep inside, Qiu Chuji marveled at this and was just about to ask for his name when someone from the left shouted, "Who is this priest from the Quanzhen Sect?" His voice

carried immense power. Qiu Chuji leapt to his right and saw four people; Peng Lianhu, Ouyang Ke, Liang Ziwing and Hou Tonghai.

Qiu Chuji cupped his fists and said, "My surname is Qiu, may I know your names?" Qiu Chuji's mighty name was well-known and feared in the Northern and Southern parts.

Sha Tongtian and the others thought, "It's no wonder he is so famous. He is indeed powerful."

Peng Lianhu thought, "We've already injured Wang Chuyi and forged animosity with Quanzhen Sect. If we combine forces and kill Qiu Chuji today, our names will travel far and wide!" He shouted, "Everyone, attack together." Before he even finished pronouncing the last word, Peng Lianhu had already retrieved his 'Judgmental Twin Brush' and advanced towards Qiu Chuji. He knew this opponent was powerful and was vicious with his onslaught, targeting his 'Yun Men' accupoint at the top and his 'Tai He' accupoint below. These two hits came in full force and left no room for mercy.

Qiu Chuji thought to himself, "This shorty is impudent! To be fair, his skills are also above average." With a swishing sound he drew out his sword and pierced Peng Lianhu's right arm, scraped Sha Tongtian's waist and, drawing back the sword, sent its hilt ramming into the critical Zhang Men accupoint in the side of Hou Tonghai's ribs. With one move he had struck three people, displaying amazing skill with the sword. Sha Tongtian and Peng Lianhu propped themselves up with their weapons. Hou Tonghai had narrowly missed having his accupoint blocked and managed to withdraw quickly, but alas a heavy kick to the buttocks sent him flying to the ground. Call it a coincidence but he landed straight on the three lumps on his head. Inwardly

shaken, Liang Ziwing propelled himself forward like a monkey and attacked.

Ouyang Ke saw that Qiu Chuji was occupied with Sha Tongtian and Peng Lianhu and now Liang Ziwing had also joined in. It was an advantage that just begged to be taken, and if not now – when? Feinting with his left hand, his right hand moved to block Qiu Chuji's 'Tao Dao', 'Hun Men' and 'Zhong Shu' accupoints with his iron fan. It seemed as though Qiu Chuji had no way out when a figure moved beside him and in a flash, a single hand reached out and halted the movement of the fan. So it was that Ma Yu, who had been observing in silence from the side, was flabbergasted to see a group of highly-skilled pugilists ganging up on his younger Martial Brother. With just three fingers he had trapped the fan; Ouyang Ke immediately felt a surge of formidable inner power coming from the handle of his fan and quickly leapt backwards in astonishment.

Ma Yu did not pursue him, but said, "Gentlemen, may I know who you are? We have never met. If there has been some misunderstanding we can talk it over, why resort to violence?" Though his tone was gentle, his voice carried abundant Qi. The projection for each word was crystal clear and bore straight into their eardrums. Sha Tongtian and the others were totally involved in their fighting when Ma Yu's sentences made them stop cold. They ceased fighting and withdrew while appraising Ma Yu.

Ouyang Ke said: "Priest, what is your revered name?"

Ma Yu replied: "My surname is Ma."

Peng Lianhu said, "Ah, so it is the 'Scarlet Sun', Revered Priest Ma. We have been rude."

Ma Yu replied, "With my shallow cultivation, how dare I claim the title of Revered?"

Though Peng Lianhu coated his words with politeness, inwardly he was thinking, "Since we have already created a grudge with the Quanzhen Sect, it is unlikely that there will be enough goodwill to forgive and forget. These two characters are the main pillars of the Quanzhen Sect and fortunately we have caught them alone. If we join forces and finish them off today, we will have less to worry about in the future. But I wonder if there are any other skilled pugilists from Quanzhen in the vicinity." A quick look around revealed only the three members of the Yang family – there were no other priests around.

Peng Lianhu said, "I have long admired the great names of the Quanzhen Seven. Where are the other five? How about inviting them here so we can meet them?"

Ma Yu replied, "Instead of concentrating on cultivation, my Martial Brothers have often meddled in worldly affairs and earned themselves empty reputations. I'm afraid they have made fools of themselves. The seven of us live in different Taoist temples and rarely gather together. I have made this trip to Zhongdu with my Martial Brother Qiu to look for our Martial Brother Wang, and by chance met all of you. All the world's martial arts branch from the same stem. Red lotus or white root, we all come from the same family. Since we have an affinity, how about becoming friends?" Being honest by nature, Ma Yu never expected that Peng Lianhu was merely sounding him out.

Hearing that there were indeed no other Quanzhen pugilists nearby, Peng Lianhu thought they could win with numbers. Not only that, the two priests had yet to meet with Wang Chuyi, and Ma Yu was trusting and off guard. All Peng Lianhu had to do was keep up this friendly pretence and they would be able to pull a sneak attack. Beaming, he said, "We are honored that Priest Qiu and Ma do not look down on us, and to be friends would be fantastic. My



surname is San; my full name is San Heimao [three black cats].”

At this, Ma Yu and Qiu Chuji were both startled, thinking, “This person’s kung fu is impressive, so that his name must be famous. But this name, San Heimao, is so strange yet I’ve never heard of it.”

Peng Lianhu tucked his ‘Judgmental Twin Brushes’ back into his waist and approached Ma Yu. He said, smiling, “Nice to meet you, Priest Ma.”

He stretched out his hand for a handshake. Unsuspectingly, Ma Yu reached out to shake his hand but the moment their hands touched, he suddenly felt Peng Lianhu’s grip tighten.

Ma Yu thought, “Hmph, trying to test my kung fu.” He merely smiled and applied his internal energy in response, squeezing Peng Lianhu’s hand. Suddenly, an intense pain penetrated into his five fingertips and it felt as if he had been pierced by many steel needles. He quickly withdrew his hand in astonishment. Peng Lianhu burst out laughing and retreated a few feet. Ma Yu raised his palm and saw that all five fingertips had been punctured deep into his flesh, and the holes were lined with black.

So it was that when Peng Lianhu was stowing his ‘Judgmental Twin Brushes’, he had secretly slipped on his special ‘Poison Needle Bangle’ on his right hand. Made from refined steel, the bangle was as slender as a thread and on it was five thin needles armed with a lethal poison. If the needles penetrated the flesh and drew blood, the victim would undoubtedly die within ten hours. Peng Lianhu usually wore this bangle to increase the potency of his palm attacks when exchanging blows, thus ensuring that his opponent would not live beyond half a day. He had also deliberately introduced himself as “San Heimao” (Three

Black Cats”) so that while Qiu Chuji and Ma Yu were busy being astounded, he could seize the chance and deliver his sneak attack.

Characters of the martial realm often harbor no admiration for one another at the first meeting, but tact and face made public aggression improper. They would often reach out for a handshake in the guise of friendliness, but in actuality it was a duel of sorts. It was not unusual for the inferior fighter to have his bones broken and his hand swollen, or to beg for mercy when the pain became too much. Ma Yu only thought that Peng Lianhu was practicing the old pugilistic habit of being friendly on the surface but secretly appraising the other’s strength. He never thought that Peng Lianhu would have another vicious trick up his sleeve. Thus, when both of them exerted strength, the five poisonous needles not only pierced his fingertips but sunk straight down to the bones of his fingers. By the time Ma Yu realized what had happened and struck with his right palm, Peng Lianhu had already leapt away.

All Qiu Chuji knew was that his Elder Martial Brother had been shaking hands with someone when his facial expression suddenly changed and he attacked. Qiu Chuji hurriedly asked, “What happened?”

Ma Yu replied angrily, “Crafty scoundrel, he poisoned me.” With that, he advanced towards Peng Lianhu.

Qiu Chuji had always known his Elder Martial Brother to be tolerant and had never seen him attack anyone in over ten years, yet at this moment, he opened his attack with the most formidable of Quanzhen’s skills – the ‘Three Flowers Atop’ palm technique. Qiu Chuji knew it must have taken a great deception for him to be so furious, so with a flick of his sword, he weaved left and right to reach Peng Lianhu. With a quick “swish, swish, swish”, he had dealt him three

strokes. By this time Peng Lianhu had already retrieved his Twin Brushes and successfully deflected two of Qiu Chuji's strokes while managing to deal a strike with one brush. But Peng Lianhu never expected Qiu Chuji's palm technique to be as ferocious as his sword. In that very instant when he was about to withdraw his brush – but not quite – Qiu Chuji reached out and grabbed it by the tip. He shouted: "Withdraw!" Combining internal power and external force, Qiu Chuji tried to break the brush; despite his using full energy, Peng Lianhu, being a formidable opponent, did not allow the brush to shatter. Qiu Chuji followed by guiding his sword straight forward and Peng Lianhu had no choice but to let go of his brush and evade. With the sword in his right hand and palm technique in his left, Qiu Chuji kept up the attack ceaselessly. Peng Lianhu had lost one brush and his right arm was also feeling stiff and weak. Having lost his edge, he repeatedly retreated.

At this point, Sha Tongtian and Liang Ziwong were embroiled with Ma Yu. Ouyang Ke and Hou Tonghai came forward to aid Peng Lianhu, one to the left and the other to the right. Faced with strong opponents, Qiu Chuji felt even more energized. With gliding palms and flashing sword, the more he fought the swifter his attacks became. Qiu Chuji was fighting three people by himself and had not lost the advantage. Over on the other side, Ma Yu was having trouble maintaining the situation. His right palm was already swollen and afflicted with numbness and itching as the poison gradually took effect. Although he knew that the needles were poisoned, he never expected such drastic reaction. He understood that the more he exerted himself, the faster his blood would circulate and the quicker the poison would attack his heart. Immediately he sat down and engaged his internal energy to halt the poison's progress, while still wielding a sword in his left hand for self-protection. Liang Ziwong's weapon was a shovel, similar to

the ones used for grave digging. Between slashing vertically, scooping horizontally, and at times sweeping across or striking directly, the variations in his attack were plentiful. Sha Tongtian's iron stick was heavy and even more dangerous. After ten moves or so, Ma Yu's breathing increased and his defensive circle shrank. Inwardly resisting the poison and outwardly defending against two enemies, he soon felt lethargic in spite having an accomplished level of internal energy.

Qiu Chuji was shocked at the sight of his Elder Martial Brother seated on the ground, with hot vapor rising slowly from his head as if he were being steamed. He wanted to finish off his three opponents quickly and rush to aid him, but these opponents were sticky and he could not spare a moment to pause in his attack and escape. Admittedly Peng Lianhu was a weaker fighter, but Ouyang Ke was proficient in both internal energy and external moves. His attacks were both fierce and unusual. In terms of ability, he was way above Peng Lianhu. From what Qiu Chuji could tell, Ouyang Ke's kung fu looked similar to that of the 'Western Poison', someone the Quanzhen Sect had always feared. This startled him and he thought, "Who is this person? Could he be a disciple of the 'Western Poison'? Has 'Western Poison' arrived on the Central Plains? I wonder if he's actually here in Zhongdu." While following this train of thought he momentarily lost concentration and repeatedly encountered close shaves.

Yang Tiexin knew in his heart that the skills of these two priests were way above his, but seeing both of them in danger he immediately lifted his spear and thrust towards Ouyang Ke's back. Qiu Chuji yelled, "Brother Yang, don't throw your life away in vain!" By the time he finished his sentence; Ouyang Ke had already broken the spear with his left foot and kicked Yang Tiexin to the ground with his right.

At this very moment they heard the sound of hooves as a great number of horses galloped swiftly towards them. Leading the way were none other than the father and son, Wanyan Honglie and Wanyan Kang.

Wanyan Honglie caught sight of his wife seated on the ground from the distance. Delighted, he hurried to her but a blade suddenly sliced through the air and came right at him. Slanting his body to avoid the slash, he saw that the wielder of the blade was a young girl dressed in red. At this point, his soldiers came forward and started fighting Mu Nianci.

Over on the other end, Wanyan Kang was startled at seeing his Shifu and shouted, "We're all on the same side, everyone stop fighting!"

Only after repeating this a few times did Peng Lianhu and the others finally retreat; the soldiers and Mu Nianci also halted. Wanyan Kang approached Qiu Chuji and bowed. "Shifu, let your disciple do the introductions," he said. "These are all senior pugilists engaged by my father."

Qiu Chuji nodded and went to check on his Elder Martial Brother. Ma Yu's right palm was black all over and, lifting up his sleeve, he saw that the blackness had spread all the way to the upper part of his arm. Astonished, he said, "How could the poison be like that?" Turning around, he said to Peng Lianhu, "Hand over the antidote!"

Peng Lianhu hesitated while thinking, "Just a little while more time and this person will die, but it wouldn't be appropriate to offend the little prince. Should I save him or not?"

Now that Ma Yu had no more enemies attacking him, he concentrated all his internal energy on resisting the poison and sure enough, the poison halted in his arm and could not

travel further upwards. Instead, the blackness gradually started moving downwards.

Wanyan Kang rushed over to his mother and exclaimed, "Mother, I've finally found you!"

Bao Xiruo was frightened and replied, "Do not ask me to return to the palace. I never will!"

Shocked, Wanyan Honglie and Wanyan Kang said in unison, "What?"

Bao Xiruo pointed at Yang Tiexin. "My husband is still alive and I will follow him to the ends of the earth," she said.

This came as no ordinary blow to Wanyan Honglie and he silently mouthed something to Liang Ziwong. Liang Ziwong understood the prince's intentions and flicked his right hand, sending three of his 'Bone-Penetrating Meridian Nails' flying towards Yang Tiexin's essential junctions. Qiu Chuji saw the flight of the nails but it was too late for him to do anything and Yang Tiexin would surely not be able to evade them. Having no projectiles with him, he grabbed a Jin soldier out of desperation and hurled him towards the space between Liang Ziwong and Yang Tiexin. With a loud "ah", the three 'Meridian Nails' struck the soldier.

Liang Ziwong regarded his 'Bone-Penetrating Meridian Nails' as his greatest skill. Having sent three nails simultaneously, it was absurd to think he would miss the target. Seeing Qiu Chuji foil his move in such a peculiar way, he roared angrily and attacked. Peng Lianhu saw this and decided against providing the antidote, knowing that the little prince's priority was rescuing his mother. He leapt forward abruptly and grabbed hold of Bao Xiruo's arm. With two swishing sounds, Qiu Chuji sent his sword thrusting towards both Liang Ziwong and Peng Lianhu. Both saw the fierceness of the strokes and were forced

backwards. Qiu Chuji thundered at Wanyan Kang, "Ignorant boy, you have called your enemy 'father' and led eighteen years of your life in folly. Now that your real father is here, aren't you going to acknowledge him?"

Having heard it from his mother, Wanyan Kang was already eighty percent convinced. Hearing it from his Shifu now further reinforced his belief and he glanced at Yang Tiexin. Wanyan Kang saw that his clothes were old and tattered and his face was smeared with dirt; turning around, he saw his 'father' wearing fine, embroidered robes and expensive jewels, looking handsome and refined. There was a world of difference between these two men. Wanyan Kang contemplated in his heart, "Am I actually going to give up this life of luxury and riches and roam the streets with this poor man? No...never!" His mind was made up.

"Shifu, don't listen to this person's nonsense," Wanyan Kang said. "Please help rescue my mother!"

"You stubbornly refuse to listen still, you're worse than a beast!" Qiu Chuji replied angrily.

Seeing that Shifu and pupil had fallen out, Peng Lianhu and the others started to attack even more fiercely. Wanyan Kang knew Qiu Chuji was in danger, but did not attempt to again stop the fight. Qiu Chuji was enraged and shouted, "Little bastard, you really have no conscience."

Wanyan Kang had always been very afraid of his Shifu and secretly hoped that Peng Lianhu and the rest would kill him to avoid any trouble in the future. Shortly into the battle, Qiu Chuji was struck by Liang Ziwong's spade and though it wasn't serious, blood seeped through his robes. From the corner of his eye he caught a hint of delight on Wanyan Kang's face and he was further incensed and swore continuously. Ma Yu retrieved a sparkler from his robes and

tossed it in the air, sending a blue blaze soaring through the sky. Peng Lianhu thought it must be a communicative signal for the Quanzhen Sect's members and alerted the others, "The old priest is sending for help."

After exchanging a few more moves, another blue blaze appeared from the northwest not far from here. "Younger Martial Brother Wang is nearby," Qiu Chuji said with delight. Switching his sword over to his left hand, he attacked from the top with his sword and from the bottom with his right palm, executing seven or eight fatal moves one after another forcing his enemies steadily backwards.

Ma Yu pointed to the blue glow in the northwest and said, "Go in that direction."

Weapons in hand, Yang Tiexin and Mu Nianci rushed in that direction while guarding Bao Xiruo. Ma Yu followed closely behind. Qiu Chuji interrupted his sword mid-move and in the next instant he had also turned to leave. Sha Tongtian repeatedly employed his 'Change Form Exchange Place' technique, hoping to bypass Qiu Chuji and snatch Bao Xiruo, but Qiu Chuji's sword was too swift and he did not succeed. It was not long before they arrived at the small inn where Wang Chuyi was staying. Qiu Chuji wondered to himself, "Why hasn't Younger Martial Brother Wang come out to greet us?"

Just after this thought, Wang Chuyi came walking unsteadily towards them, supported by a wooden stick. At the sight of each other, the Martial Brothers were shocked to see that Quanzhen Sect's top three pugilists were all injured.

Qiu Chuji called out, "Retreat back into the inn."

"Hand the Consort over in one piece and I'll spare your lives," Wanyan Honglie hollered.



“Who needs your mercy, you treacherous Jin dog?” Qiu Chuji shot back. He raised his sword and started fighting.

Despite being exhausted, Qiu Chuji still refused to yield and his swordplay remained as enthralling as ever. Seeing this, Peng Lianhu and the others were inwardly impressed. Yang Tiexin contemplated, “Since things have already come to this, it will not be easy to escape our end. We mustn’t risk Priest Qiu’s life for us.” Grasping Bao Xiruo’s hand, he stepped forward.

“Everyone, stop fighting,” he yelled. “My wife and I will end our lives here and let that be the end of it.” Raising his spear, he thrust towards his heart. With a “pu” sound, blood splattered in all directions and he fell backwards.

Bao Xiruo felt no sadness. With a bitter smile, she pulled the spear out of her husband’s body and braced it on the ground while saying to Wanyan Kang, “Child, you still don’t believe he’s your real father?” She leaned forward and sank onto the tip of the spear.

In horror, the color drained from Wanyan Kang’s face. “Mama!” he cried, rushing forward wanting to save her. Seeing this astonishing development, Qiu Chuji and the others stopped fighting. Reaching her side, Wanyan Kang saw her body was pierced through her chest by the spear and he began sobbing uncontrollably. Qiu Chuji went forward to inspect the couple’s wounds and saw that the spear had pierced fatal points on their bodies. There was no room for hope. Wanyan Kang held his mother and Mu Nianci held Yang Tiexin as the two wept with grief.

Qiu Chuji said to Yang Tiexin, “Brother Yang, tell me if you have a request and I will see that it gets done. I... I didn’t manage to save you in the end, I... I...” He felt a dull ache in his heart and choked up with sorrow.

At this very moment the sound of footsteps came. Everyone turned and saw the 'Six Freaks of Jiangnan' hurrying over with Guo Jing. Upon seeing Sha Tongtian and the others, the 'Six Freaks' immediately pulled out their weapons. Getting closer, they saw a man and a woman on the ground and looks of surprise appeared on their faces. They turned around and saw Ma Yu and Qiu Chuji and were further surprised.

Guo Jing saw Yang Tiexin lying on the ground covered with blood and hurriedly went to his side. "Uncle Yang, how are you feeling?" He asked.

Yang Tiexin was barely alive but broke into a smile when he saw Guo Jing. "Your late father and I had a pact: if we had a son and daughter then they would be married," he said. "I don't have a daughter, but this foster daughter is like my own..." He turned his gaze to Qiu Chuji. "Priest Qiu, see to this marriage and I... I will go in peace..."

"That's easy. Don't worry," Qiu Chuji assured him.

Bao Xiruo was lying beside her husband and clutched his arm with her left hand, afraid that he would leave her again. In a haze, she heard him mention the betrothal agreement from years ago. She sought to retrieve a dagger from her robes and said: "This... this is the token from that time..." Then she said, "Brother Tie, we finally to die together, I'm... I'm so happy..." With that, she showed a small smile and passed away peacefully, looking as warm and enchanting as always. Qiu Chuji retrieved the dagger and saw that it was none other than his gift to them at Ox Village in Lin'an; the words 'Guo Jing' were carved on its handle.

Yang Tiexin said to Guo Jing: "In...in honor of your late father, I hope you treat my daughter well..."

"I... I can't..." stuttered Guo Jing.

Qiu Chuji said, "I will see to everything, go... go in peace!"

Yang Tiexin had all but given up hope of finding Guo Xiaotian's descendent, and so arranged the 'Joust for a Spouse' for Mu Nianci. Today, he was not only reunited with his beloved wife but had also found his sworn brother's son; his daughter would have a husband to rely on. With that, having no further regrets, he closed his eyes for the last time.

Guo Jing was both sad and confused, thinking, "Rong'er has deep feelings for me, how can I marry someone else?" With this thought, his mind suddenly turned to something else and he was further taken aback. "How could I have forgotten Hua Zheng? The Khan has betrothed her to me, this... this... how could this be?"

All this time he had kept his good friend Tolui in his thoughts, but seldom did he think of Hua Zheng. Although the 'Six Freaks' regarded this wish difficult to fulfill, they couldn't bear to say so in front of Yang Tiexin, a dying man.

Wanyan Honglie had gone to great lengths scheming to marry Bao Xiruo, but to the end she had been unable to forget her husband. For over ten years he had loved and labored for her, but at the end of it all, things still unfolded this way. Though she was dead, Wanyan Honglie saw true happiness and contentment in her face. In all their eighteen years together, when had she ever looked at him this way? He might be a prince, but in her heart he was much, much inferior this village peasant. Despondent and heart-broken, he turned to leave.

Although the three Quanzhen priests were injured, the arrival of the 'Six Freaks' meant that Sha Tongtian and the

others wouldn't necessarily win. Since the Prince had already turned to leave, they followed.

"San Heima," shouted Qiu Chuji, "leave the antidote behind!"

Peng Lianhu laughed. "Your Stockade-Chief goes by the surname Peng; people in the pugilistic world call me the 'Butcher With A Thousand Hands'. Priest Qiu, have you lost your eyes?"

Qiu Chuji went cold, thinking, "It's no wonder this person is so powerful; so it is him." The poison had penetrated deep into his Elder Martial Brother's body and only the unique antidote from Peng Lianhu could save him. He loudly said, "Who cares if you've got a thousand hands or ten thousand? If you don't leave the antidote behind, don't hope to leave this place." Maneuvering his sword exquisitely, a flash of brilliant light advanced towards Peng Lianhu. Though only left with one brush, Peng Lianhu was not afraid. Brandishing it, they clashed head-on.

Zhu Cong saw Ma Yu was seated on the ground, working his internal energy. One of his palms was all black. "Priest Ma ... how did you get hurt?"

Ma Yu sighed. "I shook hands with that fellow Peng and he hid poison needles in his palm."

"Ah. He's not that great." Turning to Ke Zhen'E, he said, "Elder Brother, pass me a caltrop." Not understanding his intentions, Ke Zhen'E retrieved a poisonous caltrop [water chestnut] from his bag and handed it to him. Zhu Cong turned to look at the fight between Qiu Chuji and Peng Lianhu. The fight was intense, and it would be impossible to break it up with his level of kung fu alone.

"Elder Brother, let's go and break them apart. I have a plan that can save Priest Ma," he said. Ke Zhen'E nodded.

"So it is the 'Butcher with a Thousand Hands', Chief Peng!" shouted Zhu Cong. "We're all on the same side, stop fighting. I have something to say." Pulling Ke Zhen'E along, the two went forward and broke them apart - Zhu Cong with his fan and Ke Zhen'E with his staff.

Both Qiu Chuji and Peng Lianhu felt surprise hearing Zhu Cong's remark and thought, "How come we're 'on the same side' now?" Seeing the two Freaks come forward, they broke apart and waited to hear exactly how they were 'on the same side'.

Laughing cheerfully, Zhu Cong said to Peng Lianhu: "Eighteen years ago, the 'Seven Freaks of Jiangnan' and Priest Qiu had a small dispute that ended with five of our brothers injured. On the other hand, the famed Priest Qiu also sustained heavy injuries that nearly left him dead. This dispute has yet to be resolved..." Zhu Cong turned to Qiu Chuji. "Am I right, Priest Qiu?"

Qiu Chuji was enraged, thinking: "Fantastic, you're going to take advantage of my precarious situation." Aloud, he retorted: "That's right, now what?"

Zhu Cong continued, "But we also have a small feud with 'Dragon King' Sha. One inept disciple of ours once single-handedly defeated 'Dragon King' Sha's top four disciples. We've also heard that 'Dragon King' Sha and Chief Peng are the closest of friends. Since we've offended 'Dragon King' Sha, then we've also offended Chief Peng."

"Heh..heh, how dare I?" said Peng Lianhu.

Zhu Cong laughed. "Since Chief Peng and Priest Qiu both have feuds with the 'Seven Freaks of Jiangnan', wouldn't

you then be on the same side against a common enemy? Ha ha, what are you still fighting for? Wouldn't Chief Peng and I also be on the same side? Come; let's get to know each other." Zhu Cong stretched out his hand for a handshake.

Having listened to this warped nonsense, Peng Lianhu thought, "The Quanzhen Sect saved the 'Seven Freaks' disciple, so they're obviously in it together. I won't fall for your trickery. Want to trick the antidote from me? It's not so easy." Seeing Zhu Cong's outstretched hand, Peng Lianhu laughed and said, "Splendid!" He tucked his Brush back into his waist and slipped on his 'Poison Needle Ring'.

Startled, Qiu Chuji said: "Brother Zhu, be careful." Zhu Cong ignored this and stretched out his hand. With a slight crook of his little finger, he had hooked the 'Poison Needle Ring' from Peng Lianhu's finger. Peng Lianhu did not realize this and went ahead with the handshake, both parties exerting strength.

Suddenly, a small pain penetrated Peng Lianhu's palm and he struggled to let go. Raising his hand, he saw three holes in his palm that were much bigger than those of his Poison Needles, with black blood oozing from them. Instead of pain, the wound felt both numb and itchy and the sensation was rather nice. He knew that the more potent the poison, the less painful the wound would be because the numbness would be overpowering. Both angry and frightened, he had no idea how he had fallen into this trap.

Looking up, he saw Zhu Cong hiding behind Qiu Chuji, holding up an object in each hand. In between two fingers of his left hand was Peng Lianhu's 'Poison Needle Ring'. In between two fingers of his right, however, was a black object shaped like a water chestnut with a sharp tail, and it was stained with blood.

Nicknamed the 'Magical Hands Scholar', Zhu Cong's skill with his hands was near magical and impossible for any human to detect. To first take Peng Lianhu's ring then pierce his palm with the poison caltrop was child's play to him. Fuming, Peng Lianhu attacked.

Qiu Chuji raised his sword and warded off the blow, shouting: "What are you going to do?"

Zhu Cong grinned. "Chief Peng, the poisonous caltrops are my Elder Brother's specialty projectiles. Once you're hit, it doesn't matter if your name is tiger [Peng Lianhu- 'hu' means tiger], lion, leopard, pig, dog or any other beast on this earth. You still will not live beyond four hours."

"Big Brother Peng, he's insulting you," said Hou Tonghai.

"You talk too much," Sha Tongtian reproached. "Do you think Big Brother Peng hasn't realized that?"

Zhu Cong chuckled and quipped, "Good thing Chief Peng has a 'Thousand Hands'. Allow me to give you a piece of friendly advice - why not chop off the hand that's been poisoned? You'll still be left with nine hundred and ninety-nine. However you'll have to alter your nickname a bit to become the 'Butcher with Nine hundred and ninety-nine Hands'."

By this time, the numbness had already spread to Peng Lianhu's wrist. Panic-stricken, he couldn't be bothered with Zhu Cong's taunts. Beads of cold sweat dripped from his forehead.

"You have your poison needles, I have my poison caltrops; these are two completely different poisons that require completely different antidotes. If you can't bear to give up the nickname of the 'Butcher with a Thousand Hands', how

about we exchange antidotes?" suggested Zhu Cong. "We're on the same side, after all."

Before Peng Lianhu could reply, Sha Tongtian said quickly, "That will do. Hand the antidote over."

Zhu Cong said, "Elder Brother, pass him the antidote." Ke Zhen'E retrieved two small medicine packets from his robes and handed them to Zhu Cong.

"Brother Zhu, don't fall for his trap," warned Qiu Chuji. "Let him hand over the antidote first."

Zhu Cong said cheerily, "We are all men of honor, I'm not afraid."

Peng Lianhu reached into his robes and felt for the antidote and his expression changed at once. He said in a low voice, "Oh no, the antidote is gone."

Qiu Chuji flew into a rage. "Hmph... up to your tricks again! Brother Zhu, don't give it to him."

Zhu Cong laughed. "Take it!" He said. "We said we'd give it to you. The 'Quanzhen Seven' and the 'Seven Freaks of Jiangnan' are men of our word."

Sha Tongtian knew that Zhu Cong was skilful with his hands. Not wanting to be taken advantage of, he extended his iron stick horizontally. Zhu Cong placed the antidote on the stick and Sha Tongtian retrieved it. The bystanders were perplexed, not understanding why Zhu Cong gave him the antidote so casually without forcing Peng to handover his. Suspecting that the antidote was not genuine, Sha Tongtian said, "The 'Seven Freaks of Jiangnan' are renowned figures in the martial arts world. Surely you wouldn't use bogus medicine to harm others?"



Zhu Cong laughed, saying, "Of course, of course." He then returned the poison caltrops to Ke Zhen'E and started leisurely fishing out item after item from his robes. There was a handkerchief, some notes, a few pieces of loose silver and a white snuff bottle.

Peng Lianhu was dumbfounded. "Those items are mine! How did they end up with him?" he thought.

What happened was that Zhu Cong, while using his right hand to shake hands, employed his 'Empty Magical Hands' with his left. As a result, all the items in Peng Lianhu's robes had been lifted.

Zhu Cong uncorked the snuff bottle. It was divided into two compartments; one side contained red powder, the other side contained grey powder. "How is this applied?" he asked.

Though sly and aggressive by nature, Peng Lianhu's life now hung by a thread and he dared not be crafty. "The red is for consumption, and the grey for topical application."

Zhu Cong said to Guo Jing, "Hurry and fetch some water and two bowls."

Guo Jing bolted into the inn and fetched two bowls of clean water. He gave one bowl to Ma Yu and helped him drink the antidote. He then applied the grey powder to Ma Yu's palm. Just as he was about to give the other bowl of water to Peng Lianhu, Zhu Cong said, "Hold it. Give the other bowl to Priest Wang."

Though confused, Guo Jing followed Zhu Cong's instructions and gave the water to Wang Chuyi. Wang Chuyi also did not understand but accepted the bowl of water.

Sha Tongtian said, "Hey, how is your antidote applied?"

Zhu Cong replied, "Don't be anxious, nobody will die in such a short while." He reached into his robes and took out ten packets of herbs.

Guo Jing was delighted. "Yes, yes, that's the medicine for Priest Wang!" He opened all the herb packets and laid them in front of Wang Chuyi. "Priest Wang, you pick the ones that you need."

Wang Chuyi recognized the herbs and picked out "Tian Qi", "Xue Xie" and two other herbs. He chewed and swallowed them with water.

Liang Ziwong was both furious and impressed, thinking, "This dirty scholar has truly remarkable skill with his hands. All he did was brush my sleeve and actually managed to steal the packets of herbs from my robes." Turning around and brandishing his spade, he shouted: "Come, come, and let's see who the real winner is in a weapons fight!"

Zhu Cong laughed. "At that, I am definitely not your match."

Qiu Chuji said, "So this is Chief Peng Lianhu, what about the others? I do not know your names yet." Sha Tongtian declared himself in a hoarse voice. Qiu Chuji said, "Great, all of you have renowned reputations! There has been no clear winner between us today and it's a pity both sides now have injured parties. It looks like we'll have to arrange a gathering another day."

"That couldn't be better," said Peng Lianhu. "If we don't meet the 'Quanzhen Seven', it will be the biggest regret of our lives. Priest Qiu, please set the date and venue."

Qiu Chuji considered, "Elder Martial Brother Ma and Younger Martial Brother Wang have both been severely poisoned and will need at least a few months to recuperate. Younger Martial Brothers Tan, Liu and the rest are

scattered about and we will need some time to notify them.” So he said aloud, “Six months from now in August on Mid-Autumn Festival, we’ll admire the moon while discussing wugong. Chief Peng, what do you think?”

Peng Lianhu thought, “With all of the ‘Quanzhen Seven’, plus the ‘Seven Freaks of Jiangnan’, we will be heavily outnumbered. We must gather more allies. Six months should be sufficient. Prince Zhao wants us to head to Jiangnan to steal Yue Fei’s manual, so we can take the chance and meet there.” So he said, “How thoughtful of Priest Qiu to arrange a martial gathering of friends on Mid-Autumn Festival. But we must also find a tasteful venue – let’s make it the hometown of the ‘Seven Freaks of Jiangnan’.”

Qiu Chuji replied, “Excellent. We’ll meet in the Jiaxing Prefecture by the South Lake at the ‘Pavilion of the Drunken Immortal’. Everyone is welcome to invite a few more friends.”

“It’s a deal.”

Zhu Cong said, “Looks like we ‘Seven Freaks of Jiangnan’ will have no choice but to play host and foot the bills! Of all the places you had to choose from you had to pick Jiaxing so you can feast at our expense, how sly. But since it’s so rare that all of you grace Jiaxing with your presence, we will be able to afford it. Chief Peng – about the medicine – the white is for consumption and the yellow is for topical application.”

By this time, half of Peng Lianhu’s arm had already gone numb. It took him great effort to bear with it and still converse with Qiu Chuji. And then he had to put up with Zhu Cong’s incessant and useless chatter. Anger boiled in his chest but he dare not be impolite while his life was still

in their hands. When he heard Zhu Cong's last sentence, he hurriedly swallowed the white antidote.

"Chief Peng, for forty-nine days you will not go near wine or women," Ke Zhen'E said coldly. "It will be a shame if we do not see you at the gathering in Jiaxing."

Peng Lianhu replied angrily, "Thanks for your concern." Sha Tongtian applied the yellow antidote to his palm and, supporting him, turned to leave.

Wanyan Kang knelt on the ground and kowtowed four times to his mother's body. Then he turned and kowtowed a few times to Qiu Chuji. Raising his head and not uttering a single word, he walked away.

Qiu Chuji said sternly, "Kang'er, what is the meaning of this?"

But Wanyan Kang did not answer. He did not join Peng Lianhu and the others, but took another turn and went on a separate path alone. Qiu Chuji was stunned for a moment, then turned and bowed to Ke Zhen'E and Zhu Cong.

"If not for the help of the Six Heroes, my Martial Brothers and I might have lost our lives. Besides that, my disgraceful pupil has turned out to possess a wicked character. He cannot hold a candle to your virtuous pupil. For us martial arts practitioners, character and integrity are of the foremost importance; kung fu is secondary. I'm ashamed to have a disciple like him. The duel at Jiaxing's "Pavilion of the Drunken Immortal" has reached a conclusion - I admit defeat. Word will henceforth spread throughout Jianghu that Qiu Chuji has been trounced by the 'Seven Freaks of Jiangnan', and I have sincerely and gladly admitted my loss."

The “Six Freaks” swelled with pride as he spoke – their eighteen years of effort on the steppes of Mongolia had finally paid off. Ke Zhen’E uttered a few words of humility. But the “Six Freaks” then thought of their Fifth Brother, Zhang Ahsheng, who died on the steppe and sadness descended on their hearts. It was regretful that their Fifth Brother did not live to hear Qiu Chuji admitting defeat.

After they had helped Ma Yu and Wang Chuyi back into the inn, Quan Jinfa went and bought coffins to prepare for the Yang couple’s funeral. Qiu Chuji saw Mu Nianci grieving sorrowfully and felt awful himself. He said, “Miss Mu, how did your father spend the last few years?”

Wiping her tears, Mu Nianci replied, “My father and I have been wandering for over ten years, never settling in one place for more than a month. Father said he wanted to look for a... a Brother by the surname Guo...” Her voice trailed off and she slowly lowered her head.

Qiu Chuji glanced at Guo Jing, and then said to Mu Nianci, “How did your father end up adopting you?”

“I come from Lotus Pond village in the Lin’an Prefecture,” she replied. “About ten years ago, father took refuge at my home to recover from his injuries. Soon after, an epidemic broke out, killing my parents and brothers. Father then took me as his daughter and taught me martial arts. To find this Brother Guo, we roamed all over and started... started the ‘Joust for a Spouse’.”

“Ah. Your father’s surname is actually Yang, not Mu, so you should change your name accordingly.”

“No, I won’t take the surname Yang. I will still use Mu.”

Qiu Chuji said, “Why? You don’t believe me?”

Mu Nianci replied softly, "How would I dare to doubt you, Priest? But I'd rather my surname be Mu."

Qiu Chuji saw that she was stubborn and dropped the matter, thinking that she must be too traumatized by the sudden loss of her father to understand. Little did he know that he was the one who did not understand. Mu Nianci was actually thinking of something else - she had already committed her heart to Wanyan Kang. Since he was her father's real son, he must of course take the surname Yang. If she had the same surname, how could they marry?

Wang Chuyi was gradually recovering his energy after taking the antidote and lay on the bed, listening to their conversation. There was one thing he failed to understand so he asked, "How come your kung fu is so much better than your father's?"

Mu Nianci replied, "When I was thirteen, I met a strange person and he taught me kung fu for three days. It's a pity I was born unintelligent so didn't manage to learn much."

Wang Chuyi said, "He taught you just three days of kung fu and you managed to defeat your father? Who is this expert?"

"Priest, I wouldn't dare to hide anything but he made me vow that I would never reveal his name."

Wang Chuyi nodded and did not question further. Instead, he recalled her stances and moves during her fight with Wanyan Kang and conjectured, but still failed to discover which school her kung fu came from. The more he thought about her moves, the more he felt it was peculiar. He asked, "Elder Martial Brother Qiu, you taught Wanyan Kang for about eight or nine years, right?"

“Exactly nine and a half years,” Qiu Chuji replied, sighing. “I never thought he would turn out so rotten.”

Wang Chuyi said, “That’s strange!”

“Why?”

But Wang Chuyi did not reply. Ke Zhen’E asked, “Priest Qiu, how did you manage to find Brother Yang’s descendent?”

Qiu Chuji replied, “It was such a coincidence. After we made the bet, I traveled widely seeking news of the Guo and Yang families. Years passed and still there was nothing, but I did not give up. The year I went again to Ox Village looking for some clues to their whereabouts, I saw a few government officials removing objects from Brother Yang’s old home. I followed them and eavesdropped on their conversations. These officials were actually Prince Zhao’s guards from the Jin Empire. They were under orders to remove each and every item from the house, be it broken chairs or iron spears; nothing was to be left behind. I suspected that there was something much more to it, so I followed them all the way to Zhongdu.”

Guo Jing had seen Bao Xiruo’s living quarters in the Palace, and now he fully understood.

Qiu Chuji continued, “To find out why Prince Zhao had moved all these old and broken things from Ox Village, I sneaked into the Palace at night to investigate. What I saw made me both furious and upset – Brother Yang’s wife had become a Consort! In my great anger I initially thought of killing her; but then I saw her living in the old house, caressing Brother Yang’s spear and sobbing all night. I felt she wasn’t totally heartless after all and hadn’t forgotten her dead husband, so I spared her life. Later, I found out that the little Prince was actually Brother Yang’s flesh and

blood. When he was a few years older, I started teaching him martial arts.”

Ke Zhen'E said, “So all along he was none the wiser about his roots?”

“I did sound him out a few times, but found that he enjoyed riches,” he replied. “He was not a person of integrity, so I never revealed the truth to him. Every time I tried to teach him important moral principles, he would always behave apathetically and respond with his slippery tongue. If it wasn't for our wager, why would I even waste my time on him? Originally I had hoped for both sides to reconcile no matter who won the duel and then I would tell him the truth about his birth. We would then rescue his mother from the Palace and settle down in a quiet area. How was I to know that Brother Yang was still alive? Both Elder Martial Brother Ma and I were injured by those scoundrels and failed to save him and his wife... hai!” Hearing this, Mu Nianci hid her face and started weeping softly again.

Guo Jing then explained how he met Yang Tiexin and how he had seen Bao Xiruo in the night. Everyone agreed that although Bao Xiruo had lost her virtue in the Zhao Palace, she was, after all, under the impression that her husband was dead. In the end she followed her husband in death and there was no one present that did not admire her loyalty or sigh at the tragedy.

The conversation then shifted to the Mid-Autumn Festival duel. Zhu Cong said, “The ‘Quanzhen Seven’ will be assembled there. What have we to worry about?”

“It's just that those scoundrels might bring along enough good fighters to outnumber us,” Ma Yu said.

Qiu Chuji said, “Which other good fighters can they bring along? Are there so many good fighters in the world?”



Ma Yu sighed. "Younger Martial Brother Qiu, your skills have improved greatly in the past few years and brought glory to our Sect. Yet, you still haven't been able to curb the arrogance of youth. You..."

Qiu Chuji laughed and completed, "I must know that there will always be a higher person, like there will always be a higher heaven."

Ma Yu smiled. "Isn't it so? The people we met just now really possess skills that are no lower than ours. If they invite more fighters of their caliber to the 'Pavilion of the Drunken Immortal', then it's hard to tell who will win."

Qiu Chuji cocked his head proudly and said, "Elder Martial Brother, you worry too much. Is it even possible that Quanzhen Sect would lose to that bunch of thugs?"

Ma Yu replied, "Nothing is certain in this world. If not for Brother Ke and Brother Zhu, the decades-old reputation of Quanzhen Sect would have been ruined by us three Martial Brothers."

Ke Zhen'E and Zhu Cong declined modestly. "It was just because the opposition employed dirty tricks. How can it be taken into account?"

Ma Yu sighed again. "Martial Uncle Zhou was taught personally by our sect's founder and his skills are ten times better than ours. Alas, because of his stubborn and competitive nature, he has been missing for over ten years. We must take this as a lesson and always remain cautious."

Now that Ma Yu phrased it this way, Qiu Chuji did not dare to rebut. The 'Six Freaks' never knew the 'Quanzhen Seven' had a Martial Uncle. From Ma Yu's words, they deduced that this matter was not something that the Quanzhen Sect was proud of. It would not be tactful to make any comments

and so they refrained; but nevertheless they were curious. Wang Chuyi listened to their dialogue but remained silent, mulling over something.

Qiu Chuji glanced at Guo Jing and Mu Nianci. "Brother Ke, you have nurtured a fine and gallant disciple. With such a son-in-law, my Brother Yang will be able to rest in peace."

Mu Nianci's face reddened and she stood up. Lowering her head, she walked out of the room. Watching her stand up and walk out, a notion flashed through Wang Chuyi's mind and he got out of bed, sending his palm straight at her shoulder. This move was swift and by the time Mu Nianci sensed it, his palm had already reached her right shoulder. He paused there for a moment, waiting for her to exercise internal energy to resist. At the very moment when the energy was just about to respond, Wang Chuyi yanked her shoulder. So distinguished a character was the 'Immortal with the Iron Foot', 'Jade Sun' Wang Chuyi that even though he had not recovered from his heavy injuries and his arms were devoid of internal energy, he was still able to pinpoint the void in her qi. With this push and pull, Mu Nianci swayed and instantly fell forward. Wang Chuyi extended his right hand to support her right shoulder and she was upright again. It was all beyond her control and her lovely eyes widened with a mixture of surprise and bewilderment.

Wang Chuyi laughed and said, "Don't be frightened Miss Mu, I was just testing your kung fu. The senior expert who taught you for three days - did he dress like a beggar and have just nine fingers?"

Mu Nianci said in surprise, "Uh? Yes, that's right. Priest Wang, how did you know?"

Wang Chuyi smiled. "This 'Nine-Fingered Divine Beggar', Elder Hong, goes about things in a truly mysterious

manner. It's just like seeing the heavenly dragon's head but catching no hint of the tail. To have been taught personally by him is to your great fortune and a cause for celebration."

"It was a pity he was so busy and only taught me for three days."

Wang Chuyi let out a sigh. "You should be content. You have gained more in those three days than what others can teach you in ten or twenty years."

Mu Nianci said, "Priest is right." After a brief pause, she continued, "Priest Wang, do you happen to know where Elder Hong is?"

Laughing, he replied, "Now you've got me stumped. I last saw him at Mount Hua over twenty years ago and have not heard from him since." Disappointed, Mu Nianci walked slowly out of the room.

Han Xiaoying asked, "Priest Wang, who is this Elder Hong?"

Wang Chuyi smiled and seated himself on the bed. Qiu Chuji said, "Heroine Han, have you heard of the 'Eastern Heretic', 'Western Poison', 'Southern Emperor', 'Northern Beggar' and 'Central Divinity'?"

Han Xiaoying replied, "I've heard people say they are the five strongest martial artists in the world, but I don't know if it's true."

Qiu Chuji said, "It is."

Ke Zhen'E said, "So this Elder Hong is the 'Northern Beggar'?"

Wang Chuyi replied, "That's right. The 'Central Divinity' refers to our late founder, the Reverend Wang."

Upon hearing that Elder Hong was mentioned alongside the 'Quanzhen Seven's' Shifu, they were immediately filled with awe. Qiu Chuji turned and smiled at Guo Jing. "This future wife of yours is the disciple of the great 'Nine-Fingered Divine Beggar'. Who would dare bully you in the future?" Guo Jing felt his cheeks burn and wanted to dispute this, but he just stammered and did not manage to say anything.

Han Xiaoying asked, "Priest Wang, how could you tell that she was taught by the 'Nine-Fingered Divine Beggar' by just pushing her shoulder?"

Qiu Chuji motioned for Guo Jing to come over and Guo Jing went to his side as instructed. Qiu Chuji pushed Guo Jing's shoulder with his palm, exerting pressure with internal energy. But Guo Jing had cultivated profound internal energy under Ma Yu's guidance and also endured over ten years of hard physical training from the "Six Freaks". As a result, he had considerable internal and external strength. With this push, Qiu Chuji could not bring him down. Laughing, he said, "Good lad!" and the pressure loosened.

Guo Jing had exercised his internal energy to resist the push and now he relaxed both outwards and inwards. Quick as lightning, Qiu Chuji seized this instant; Guo Jing's earlier energy had dissipated and his new wave of energy had yet to expand, leaving a gap. With a light pull, Guo Jing fell backwards. He extended his hands and, using his fingers, propelled himself upright again.

Everyone burst out laughing. Zhu Cong said, "Jing'er, remember this expert move that Priest Qiu just taught you." Guo Jing nodded in obedience.

Qiu Chuji said, "Heroine Han, when pulled by the shoulder, all martial artists in the world will fall backward if they are

unable to resist. But with the unique kung fu of the 'Nine-Fingered Divine Beggar', one will fall forward instead. This is because his kung fu is rooted in extreme, rigid toughness. When faced with strength, it responds with greater strength. Though Miss Mu only spent three days in his tutelage, she has evidently grasped his martial arts philosophy. Though she was unable to withstand Younger Martial Brother Wang's pull, she refused to succumb to the situation. Even if she had to fall, she would fall in the opposite direction to the enemy's strength."

The 'Six Freaks' thought what he said made sense, and admired the Quanzhen Sect's extensive knowledge. Zhu Cong said, "Priest Wang has seen the 'Nine-Fingered Divine Beggar' display his kung fu?"

Wang Chuyi said, "Over twenty years ago, my late Shifu competed in the Mount Hua Tournament with the 'Nine-Fingered Divine Beggar', Huang Yaoshi and the other Greats. Elder Hong's kung fu was truly outstanding but he is also very gluttonous and Mount Hua was short of delicacies. Feeling extremely bored, he took sword as wine and fist as dishes and began chatting about the theories of sword and fist with my late Shifu and Elder Huang Yaoshi. At that time I was serving my Shifu and was very lucky indeed to have heard these brilliant theories. In fact, I learned a lot."

Ke Zhen'E said, "Oh, so of the group, 'Eastern Heretic', 'Western Poison', Huang Yaoshi must be the so-called 'Eastern Heretic'?"

Qiu Chuji replied, "Correct." He then turned to Guo Jing and said jovially, "Although Elder Martial Brother Ma taught you some internal energy, luckily you are not officially his disciple. If you start comparing seniority, you'll be one level

lower than your future wife! You'll never be able to raise your head in this life."

Guo Jing went red. "I'm not marrying her."

Startled, Qiu Chuji said, "What?"

"I'm not marrying her!" Guo Jing repeated.

Qiu Chuji's face sank and he stood up. "But why?"

Ever doting on her disciple, Han Xiaoying saw that Guo Jing was in a tight spot and hurriedly explained on his behalf: "We received word that Master Yang's child was a male. Thinking that the betrothal agreement was nullified, Jing'er has already become engaged in Mongolia. The Khan of Mongolia, Genghis Khan, has appointed him as his imperial son-in-law."

Qiu Chuji's face hardened and he glared at Guo Jing. Laughing icily, he said, "Brilliant, that girl is a Princess and a precious imperial descendent so commoners can't hold a candle to her. Are you just going to conveniently ignore the wishes of the dead? You lust for riches and betray your roots, so how are you different than that scoundrel Wanyan Kang? And what of your late father's wishes?"

Panicking, Guo Jing kowtowed. "I never met my father and my mother has never mentioned anything about his wishes. Priest, please enlighten me."

At this, Qiu Chuji lost his cold smile and his expression softened at once. "So you are really not to blame. I was too quick to jump to conclusions." He then explained everything from beginning to the end - his meeting with the Guo and Yang sworn brothers eighteen years ago at Ox Village, the slaughtering of soldiers that night, his search for the Guo and Yang family wives, his misunderstanding with the

'Seven Freaks of Jiangnan' and the wager that followed, et cetera.

Now knowing the circumstances of his birth and how everything had begun, he broke down in sobs. His father died a horrible death and had yet to be avenged; he then thought of the great kindness of his seven Shifus -- how could he even hope to repay them in this lifetime?

Han Xiaoying said kindly, "It's very common for a man to have more than one wife. Just let the Khan know about this and marry both women. That way, all your problems will be solved. I reckon the Khan himself has more than a hundred wives."

Wiping away his tears, he replied, "I can't marry Princess Hua Zheng either."

Surprised, Han Xiaoying asked, "Why?"

"I wouldn't like her as my wife."

"But haven't you always been on very good terms with her?"

"I regard her as a younger sister and a good friend; but I certainly don't want her as my wife."

Qiu Chuji said happily, "Good child, you've got backbone! Khan or not, Princess or not, who cares? Just obey your father and Uncle Yang and get married to Miss Mu." Unexpectedly, Guo Jing shook his head again.

"I won't marry Miss Mu either."

Everyone present was bewildered, not knowing what was running through his head. But Han Xiaoying was a woman and she paid heed to details. "You like someone else?" she

asked gently. Guo Jing blushed and, after a moment or two, nodded his head.

Han Baoju and Qiu Chuji asked sternly in unison, "Who is it?"

Guo Jing opened his mouth to answer but faltered. During the fight with Mei Chaofeng and the others at the Jin Palace the previous night, Huang Rong had caught the attention of Han Xiaoying. She had secretly marveled at this girl with her graceful movements and a face as delicate as those you only see in paintings. Thinking back, Huang Rong did seem very affectionate towards Guo Jing and had been especially looking out for him. Han Xiaoying asked, "It's the young girl who dressed in white, isn't it?" Guo Jing went red as he nodded.

Qiu Chuji said impatiently, "What young or old girl in white or black?"

Han Xiaoying muttered to herself, "I heard Mei Chaofeng call her Little Martial-Sister and addressed her father as Shifu..."

Qiu Chuji and Ke Zhen'E stood up at once and said together, flabbergasted: "She's Huang Yaoshi's daughter?"

Holding Guo Jing's hand, Han Xiaoying asked, "Jing'er is her surname Huang?"

Guo Jing answered, "Yes."

This response left Han Xiaoying speechless.

Ke Zhen'E muttered, "You want to marry Mei Chaofeng's Younger Martial-Sister?"

Zhu Cong asked, "Her father has betrothed her to you?"



Guo Jing replied, "I've never met her father, nor do I know who her father is."

Zhu Cong asked again, "So you have an illicit engagement?"

Not knowing what an 'illicit engagement' meant, Guo Jing widened his eyes and did not reply. Zhu Cong continued, "You've told her that you will definitely marry her, and she's also said that she'll definitely marry you, is that right?"

Guo Jing replied, "I never said that." After a brief pause, he continued, "We don't have to say it. I can't do without her and she can't do without me. We know this in our hearts."

Having never experienced the feeling of love, Han Baoju was displeased hearing this and said impatiently, "What nonsense is this?"

However, Han Xiaoying's mind flitted to Zhang Ahsheng as she thought, "Amongst us 'Seven Freaks', Fifth Brother's character was the most similar to Jing'er's. He loved me in secret - he always thought he wasn't good enough for me - and so he never expressed his feelings. Was it like Jing'er and that girl, what with the 'we both know it in our hearts; I can't do without her and she can't do without me'? If I had let him know, just a few months before he died, that I actually couldn't do without him, he would have at least had a few months of true happiness in his lifetime."

Zhu Cong said calmly, "Her father is a ruthless monster who kills without blinking, did you know that? If he found out that you got close to his daughter in secret, how could you even hope to live? Mei Chaofeng hasn't even learned one-tenth of his kung fu and she is already so formidable. If the Master of Peach Blossom Island decides to kill you...who will be able to save you?"

Guo Jing said softly, "Rong'er is so nice, I doubt... I doubt her father will be a bad person."

"Bullshit!" Han Baoju berated. "Huang Yaoshi is utterly evil, how could he not be a bad person? Quickly vow that you'll never see that little demoness again."

Because the 'Twin Killers of the Dark Winds' had killed the 'Smiling Dhuda' Zhang Ahsheng, the 'Six Freaks' bore a grudge as deep as the ocean towards them and they hated their Shifu to the core. They all thought that the kung fu the Twin Killers used to kill Zhang Ahsheng had been taught by Huang Yaoshi; had there been no Huang Yaoshi in this world, Zhang Ahsheng wouldn't have died.

Guo Jing was in an extremely difficult position. On the one hand was his deep gratitude towards his Shifus and on the other was a love both sincere and true. If he could never see Rong'er again, how could he live? His Shifus' eyes were fixed sternly on him and with an aching heart he dropped down to his knees with tears streaming down his cheeks. Han Baoju stepped forward and said harshly, "Say it! Say that you'll never see that little demoness again."

Suddenly, a clear female voice shouted from outside the window: "Why are you bullying him like that? How shameless!" Everyone was startled. The girl called, "Jing ge ge, hurry outside."

Surprised and delighted to hear Huang Rong's voice, Guo Jing dashed outside and saw her standing in the courtyard with his 'Blood-Sweating Horse'. The little red horse saw Guo Jing and let out a long neigh, raising its front hoofs.

Han Baoju, Quan Jinfu, Zhu Cong and Qiu Chuji followed him out of the room. Guo Jing said to Han Baoju, "Third Teacher, that's her, she's Rong'er. Rong'er isn't a demoness!"

"You ugly and short fatty, why did you call me a little demoness?" Huang Rong scolded. She then pointed to Zhu Cong and said, "And you, sly and sloppy scholar! Why did you say my father is a monster who kills without blinking?"

Not taking a little girl's words to heart, Zhu Cong merely smiled. Looking at Huang Rong, he thought that her beauty was indeed peerless and none he had seen in his life could match hers - no wonder Jing'er was so crazy about her. Han Baoju, however, was absolutely furious; so much so that the moustache at the edge of his lips had curled. He yelled, "Get out, get out!"

Huang Rong started clapping and sang: "Shorty-gourd, tumbling ball, with one kick, rolls three times; with two kicks..."

Guo Jing exclaimed, "Rong'er, stop being discourteous! These are my Shifus."

Huang Rong stuck out her tongue and made a face. Moving forward, Han Baoju struck out his arm to hit her. Huang Rong sang again: "Shorty-gourd, tumbling ball..." Sudden, she reached out and grabbed the cloth at Guo Jing's waist. With a hard tug, both of them mounted the horse. With a lift of the reins, the little red horse bolted forward and away like an arrow leaving the bow. No matter how fast Han Baoju was, how could he possibly catch up with the lightning speed of a 'Blood-Sweating Horse'? By the time Guo Jing had settled himself, he turned his head to see that the faces of Han Baoju and the others were already blurs; in the next instant they were reduced to little black dots. His own face was wrapped in the rushing wind and his ears enveloped in the sound of it. The little red horse continued to surge forward at an amazing pace.

Huang Rong held the reins in her right hand and held Guo Jing's hand with her left. Though they had parted for less than half a day, they had just gone through an agonizing experience. Though one was inside the room and the other outside the window, both had similar feelings of anxiety. Now it felt like they had re-united after a calamity. Guo Jing's heart was clouded with indecision – running from his Shifus like this was hugely wrong. Yet when he thought of giving up this girl in his arms, who was dearer than his own life, and never seeing her again, he would rather slice his neck and bleed to death.

Only after the little red horse had galloped more than ten li beyond the Jin Capital did Huang Rong pull back the reins and halt, leaping off the horse. Guo Jing followed. The little red horse kept rubbing its head against Guo Jing's waist, displaying great affection. Guo Jing and Huang Rong held hands and gazed at each other in silence; each having a multitude of words to say but not knowing where to begin. But even in the absence of words, their hearts were linked and they were aware of each other's thoughts. After a long while, Huang Rong lightly released her hand and retrieved a towel from the leather sack on the horse's side. She wet the towel in a small stream and gave it to Guo Jing to wipe his face. Guo Jing was currently in a dazed state and did not take the towel but suddenly said, "Rong'er, we have to do it!"

Jumping in surprise, Huang Rong said, "What is it?"

"We'll head back and see my Shifus."

"Go back? Go back together?" She said, stunned.

"Yes. I want to hold your hand and tell my six Shifus, Priest Ma and the rest, 'Rong'er is not a demoness'..." Holding Huang Rong's little hand and lifting his head, he said firmly,

as if Ke Zhen'E, Ma Yu and the rest were in front of him, "Shifus, you have shown me great kindness that I will never be able to repay even with my life. But, but, Rong'er is really not a demoness, she's a very, very good girl, very, very good..." In his heart he had innumerable words and phrases in defense of Huang Rong, but when the words were in his mouth, he could say nothing but 'very, very good'.

Huang Rong found it funny at first but as Guo Jing went on she felt greatly moved. Gently, she said, "Jing ge ge, your Shifus hate me to the core. Nothing you say will make a difference. Let's not go back! I'll follow you to the secluded mountains, to an island in the sea, to someplace where they'll never find us and live there forever."

Guo Jing's heart gave a start, but he said seriously, "Rong'er, we must go back."

"But they'll surely separate us," she wailed. "Then we'll never be able to see each other, ever again."

"Then we'll just not separate, until death parts us."

Huang Rong's initial misery abated with these words; words that weighed more than a thousand vows and a million promises. Suddenly she was filled with such confidence, a feeling that their two hearts had long been stubbornly knotted together, so stubbornly that no person or force in this world could separate them. She thought to herself: 'Yes, that's it. In the worst case we can only die; surely there can't be anything worse than death?'

She said aloud, "Jing ge ge, I will abide by you forever. We'll just won't separate until death parts us."

Guo Jing said with delight, "I've always said you were a very, very good girl."

Smiling gaily, Huang Rong retrieved a large piece of raw beef from the sack and coated it with moist earth. Gathering some dry twigs and branches, they started a fire. She said, "Let the little red horse rest for a bit. We'll set off after we eat."

After they had finished the beef and the little red horse had had its fill of grass, the two of them mounted the horse and went back the way they came. Not long after passing a sign they arrived at the inn. Guo Jing held Huang Rong's hand and together, they stepped inside. The shopkeeper had once been recipient of Guo Jing's silver and looked joyous at seeing his return. Hurrying forward, he welcomed Guo Jing, saying, "Good day to you, sir! All the other guests have left the city. What would you like to eat?"

Guo Jing said, surprised, "They've all left? Did they leave any messages?"

"No, they didn't. They headed south and haven't been gone for more than four hours."

Turning to Huang Rong, Guo Jing said, "We'll catch up with them." They left the inn, mounted the horse and headed south in pursuit, but failed to catch sight of the three priests or the 'Six Freaks'. So they turned back once again. The little red horse, spirited as ever after having done two trips, still showed no signs of weariness and continued galloping relentlessly. Along the way they made inquiries about the three priests and 'Six Freaks' but no one had seen anyone like them and Guo Jing was thoroughly disappointed.

Huang Rong said, "All of them will be gathering at the 'Pavilion of the Drunken Immortal' during the Mid-Autumn Festival, so you'll definitely be able to see your Shifus then."

It still wouldn't be too late to tell them that I'm 'very, very good'."

"Mid-Autumn Festival is a whole six months away," he replied.

Smiling cheerfully, Huang Rong said, "Then for these six months we'll have fun and be merry, wouldn't that be great?"

Besides being adventurous by nature, Guo Jing, like all young people, was also playful. Furthermore, he would be accompanied by the girl he loved and couldn't ask for more. Applauding the idea, the pair hurried to the nearest town to spend the evening. The next day they bought a white horse; Guo Jing insisted on riding it, letting Huang Rong ride the little red horse. With reins in hand, they traveled leisurely and enjoyed themselves along the way. Sometimes they slept beside each other in the wilderness, other times they shared a room at an inn. Despite their deep love for each other, they were young and innocent and did nothing licentious. Huang Rong did not think this situation was unusual; Guo Jing, however, felt that this was how things were meant to be.

One day they arrived in Xiqing Prefecture, which was east of Jingdong Road and was controlled by the Taining military. As it grew closer to noon, the weather became increasingly humid. Having ridden with haste for nearly half a day, trickles of perspiration formed on their foreheads and backs as the bright, orange sun shone directly on them. Sand and dust from the trail scattered all around them as they rode, the particles sticking to their sweating faces. The discomfort was unbearable.

"Let's not hurry anymore. We'll find a cool and breezy place to rest," Huang Rong suggested.

Guo Jing replied, "Sure. Let's have a pot of tea in the next town before doing anything else."

As they spoke, their horses caught up with a sedan chair with a scrawny donkey leading. Riding the donkey was a big fat man clothed in yam-colored gauze robes, continuously fanning himself with a big white fan. The donkey staggered under the weight of his 227 jin [113kg / 250lb] body, with every step proving to be a hurdle. As for the sedan chair, its screens were lifted for cooling purposes and within it sat a fat middle-aged woman in pink robes. Coincidentally, the two sedan-bearers were also thin and frail and both were panting heavily. Beside the sedan was a servant girl with a sunflower-fan, relentlessly fanning the fat woman. Huang Rong urged her horse forward and overtook this group of people and passed them by seventy or eighty feet. She then reined in and turned around to face them.

Curious, Guo Jing asked, "What are you doing?"

"I want to see what this madam looks like," came her reply. Peering into the sedan, she saw that the fat woman was forty-odd years of age. She had a gold hairpin in her hair, and at the edge of her temple was a large, red velvet flower. She had a broad mouth, beady eyes, two flapping ears and a nose so flat it looked like it wasn't there. Her plump face was as round as a plate with a thick layer of powder slapped on. However, streams of perspiration from her forehead had already washed streaks of powder to create several ridges on her face. Hearing Huang Rong's words, she raised a pair of bushy eyebrows and glowered fiercely at her.

"What's there to see?" The fat woman rudely said.

Huang Rong already had intentions of creating trouble and she couldn't have been happier now that the fat woman



took the initiative to stir it up. Halting the little red horse and blocking the way, she grinned and said, "I'm admiring your slim figure, it's really nice!" All of a sudden, she lifted the reins with a cry and the little red horse charged straight at the sedan chair. Shocked, the two sedan-bearers dropped it immediately and escaped to the sides. The sedan chair toppled over and the fat woman came tumbling noisily out, landing right smack in the middle of the path. Her arms and legs flailed helplessly about and she was unable to pick herself up. But Huang Rong had halted the little red horse and was now clapping her hands and howling with laughter. She had intended to ride away after this prank, but the fatty on the donkey brandished his mule whip and lashed it ferociously towards her.

He bellowed: "Where did this little witch pop up from?"

Lying horizontally across the path, an even worse string of obscenities escaped the fat woman's mouth.

Huang Rong caught the whip with her left hand and gave it a small tug, causing the fat man to tumble off his donkey. Raising the whip, she swung it towards him. The fat woman screamed loudly, "Female robber! Murderer! She's blocked our way and robbed us!" Unrelenting, Huang Rong pulled out her E'Mei Dagger and bent down. A "chit" sound and blood splattered across the fat woman's face and she squealed like a dying pig. Her left ear had been sliced off.

This scared the living daylight out of the fat man and he immediately knelt, whimpering: "Mercy, big Lady King! I... I have silver!"

Huang Rong made a face. "Who wants your silver? Who is this woman?"

"She... She's my wife! We... we... she went to her mother's house for a visit."

“Both of you are fat and robust; why can’t you walk? I can show mercy, but you have to follow my orders.”

“Yes, yes,” he sputtered. “We’ll obey Lady King’s orders.”

Huang Rong burst out laughing when she heard him address her as ‘Lady King’, thinking it was a pretty interesting title. She said, “Where are the two sedan chair bearers? Get inside the sedan chair – all of you, together with that servant girl.”

Not daring to defy her, the three servants tipped the fallen sedan chair upright and climbed inside. Thankfully, the three of them were thin and small so it wasn’t much of a squeeze. In fact, their combined mass might’ve even been smaller than that of the fat woman. Six pairs of eyes, the three servants’, Guo Jing’s and the fat couples’ were fixed nervously on Huang Rong, not knowing what strange ideas she might have.

Huang Rong said, “You, husband and wife, have led a life of power and luxury, bullying the poor just because you have a little stinking money. Now that you’ve met the big ‘Lady King’, would you like to live or die?”

By this time, the fat woman had stopped her wailing. With her left hand pressed firmly on the wound on the side of her head, she said together with her fat husband, “We want to live, we want to live! Please have mercy, Lady King!”

“All right,” Huang Rong said. “Today, it’s your turn to be the sedan chair bearers. Lift it up!”

The fat woman cried, “I... I only know how to sit in them; I don’t know how to carry them!”

A dagger flew past her, grazing the tip of her nose. Huang Rong shouted, “If you don’t carry the sedan chair, I’m going

to slice off your nose."

Thinking that her nose had already been sliced off, the fat woman shrieked, "Aiya, the pain is killing me!" Huang Rong shouted again, "Are you going to carry the sedan chair, or not?"

The fat man quickly lifted one end of the sedan chair and said, "We'll carry it, we'll carry it!"

Left with no choice, the fat woman lowered her body and placed the other end of the sedan chair pole on her shoulder, then stood upright again. Both husband and wife were truly sturdy and robust, having eaten plenty of tonics. They strode away with the poles on their shoulders, looking like experienced sedan chair bearers.

Huang Rong and Guo Jing cheered in unison, "Well carried!" They trailed behind the sedan chair on their horses for about a hundred feet before Huang Rong urged her horse to a gallop.

"Jing ge ge, let's go!"

Together, they galloped swiftly and after a short distance, turned back for a look. They couldn't help but burst out in peels of laughter at the sight. The fat couple was still walking with the sedan chair pole on their shoulders, not daring to put it down.

"That fat woman is both cruel and hideous and is actually quite a suitable choice. I originally wanted to capture her and give her to Qiu Chuji as a wife; it's too bad I can't beat that Ox-nose in a fight."

"Why would you give her to Priest Qiu?" Guo Jing asked, baffled. "He wouldn't want a wife."

“Of course he wouldn’t. But at the same time, why doesn’t he understand you? You said you didn’t want to marry Miss Mu but he still tried to force you to. Hmph, one day when I can defeat that Ox-nose priest, I’ll force him to take a wicked and ugly woman as his wife and let him have a taste of being forced to marry!”

Hearing this, Guo Jing’s smile faded and he was silent for a moment. Then he said, “Rong’er, Miss Mu is neither wicked nor ugly. But I’ll only take you as my wife.”

With a lovely smile, Huang Rong said, “Even if you didn’t say it, I know.”

They continued their journey until the sound of rushing water emerged from behind a row of trees. Huang Rong wove her way past a big tree and gave a cry of delight. Guo Jing followed and soon saw a clear stream; so clear in fact that you could see the stream bed made up of green, white, red and purple pebbles. Hanging willows graced both banks and their branches lightly brushed the water’s surface, beneath which many fish swam freely. Huang Rong removed her outer robe and jumped into the water with a splash. Alarmed, Guo Jing went near the edge of the stream only to see both her hands raised high, grasping a green fish that was about one chi long [33.3cm / 13in.]. The fish wriggled desperately, struggling to escape. Huang Rong called out, “Catch!”

She threw the fish towards him. Displaying his seize and control method, Guo Jing caught the fish. But the fish was extremely slippery and slid out of his hands immediately and flipped wildly on the ground.

Clapping and laughing, Huang Rong called, “Jing ge ge, come in and swim.” Having grown up on the steppes, Guo

Jing did not know how to swim and shook his head with a smile.

“Come in, I’ll teach you,” she urged.

Huang Rong looked like she was having a lot of fun in the water, so he removed his outer clothes and slowly waded in. Huang Rong gave his leg a tug and he lost balance, falling in and gulping down a few mouthfuls of water in panic. Huang Rong laughed as she helped him up, and began teaching him the technique of swimming. The essentials of the skill lay in regulating one’s breathing. Since Guo Jing was acquainted with internal energy practice techniques and proficient with breath regulation, it took him only half a day’s practice to get the hang of swimming. That night they slept near the bank of the stream; early the next morning it was back to one teaching, one learning. Growing up on an island in the sea, Huang Rong had been proficient in aquatic skills since she was young. Be it literature or martial arts, there was nothing Huang Yaoshi did not excel at, yet his aquatic skills were far behind those of his daughter. Under the guidance of this brilliant instructor, Guo Jing spent eight to ten hours underwater every day. After seven or eight days had passed, he could swim up and down as he pleased; float and sink as he chose.

On this particular day, they had been swimming for hours and their enthusiasm still seemed boundless. They defied the current and had just swum a few li upstream when they heard the sound of falling water. Rounding a bend, their eyes were greeted with what looked like flying pearls and sprinkling jade – it was actually a waterfall of a few hundred feet in height, with large amounts of water spilling down ceaselessly from the cliff peak.

“Jing ge ge, let’s try and make it up to the cliff from the waterfall,” Huang Rong said.

“Okay, let’s give it a try. You’d better wear your ‘Soft Hedgehog Armor’.”

“No need!”

With a determined shout, the pair plunged their way into the waterfall. The current was extremely swift – forget climbing, they couldn’t even stand properly, and with a slight shift of their feet their bodies were pushed far downstream by the current. After a few unsuccessful attempts, they finally gave up in exhaustion. Feeling extremely discontented, Guo Jing said with rising anger, “Rong’er, we’ll have a good rest tonight and come again tomorrow.”

Huang Rong said, laughing, “Okay! You needn’t get angry at the waterfall, though.”

Realizing he was being silly, Guo Jing laughed along with her. The next day they tried again, and this time managed to climb over ten feet. Fortunately, both were proficient in their lightness skills (qing gong) and every time they were pushed down by the water, they only fell into the deep waterfall plunge pool and did not hurt themselves. On the eighth day, Guo Jing finally managed to reach the top. Stretching out his hand, he hauled Huang Rong up and they jumped up and down in jubilation, delirious with their triumph. Then, hand-in-hand, they slid down the waterfall.

And so, after spending nearly ten days in this fashion, Guo Jing’s aquatic skills were no longer weak, thanks to his deep internal energy. Though he was still far behind Huang Rong, she told him that he had already surpassed her father. Only when the waterfall ceased to interest them did they finally get back onto their horses and journey southwards.

On this day, the sun had already set and the vast, cloudy sky was a dark blanket of blue when the pair arrived at the banks of Changjiang River. Guo Jing gazed east where the great river's waves broke steadily and unfaltering. All around him was an abundant excess of nature, seemingly infinite. Water flowed unceasingly into the river from upstream; it was steadfast, and it would run without rest for eternity. With such awe-inspiring scenery before his eyes, feelings of heroism and valor stirred in his chest and he felt like his body had merged into one with the river. Guo Jing continued admiring the scenery for a fairly long while before Huang Rong suddenly spoke: "If you want to go, let's go."

Guo Jing replied, "Okay!"

Having spent all these days together, there was no longer a need for many words between them before they knew what the other was thinking. Huang Rong could see from the expression in his eyes that he wanted to swim across the river. Guo Jing released the white horse's reins and said, "You're of no use now, so go your own way."

With a pat on the back of the little red horse, they leapt into the river together. The little red horse let out a long neigh and swam out in front, while Guo Jing and Huang Rong swam side-by-side behind it. By the time they reached the middle of the river, the little red horse was already way ahead of them. Above them, myriads of stars sparkled in the sky and aside from the sound of the waves, all else was quiet. It was as if they were the only two people in heaven and earth.

After swimming for a while longer, dark clouds suddenly started gathering in the sky and on the river, all was pitch black. Lightning and thunder followed and each roar of thunder seemed like it had struck their heads.

"Rong'er," Guo Jing called. "Are you afraid?"

Smiling, she said, "I'm with you, I'm not afraid."

The rain then started falling mercilessly and eventually ended as abruptly as it began. When they finally reached the other side of the river, the storm had ended and the moon had begun to give way to the sun. Guo Jing gathered some dry twigs and started a fire. From her bag, Huang Rong retrieved a dry set of clothing for both of them and they hung their wet clothes above the fire to dry.

After a short nap, brightness crept slowly over the horizon. In a small peasant hut by the river, a single rooster cleared its throat and started its long crow. Huang Rong yawned and exclaimed, "I'm hungry!" She sprinted towards the hut and returned within a quarter of an hour with a big fat chicken in hand. Chuckling, she said, "Let's go farther away so the owner won't see."

The two of them journeyed eastward a few li and the little red horse trailed behind them obediently. Huang Rong used her E'Mei dagger to cut open the chicken's stomach and proceeded to remove its organs, but she did not pluck its feathers. Wetting some earth with water, she coated the chicken with mud and roasted it over fire. Some moments later, a sweet fragrance seeped through the mud. When the mud had become completely dry, it was removed and the chicken skin and feathers came off with it, exposing tender white meat and releasing a rich, savory aroma that filled their nostrils.



## Chapter 12 -The Proud Dragon Shows Remorse

Translated by Patudo, Xfiberloss and Sunnysnow, with notes by Qiu Shuyi



*Suddenly, Wanyan Kang understood, "She is telling me that we are not related by blood at all!" He took her right hand in his and smiled. Mu Nianci's face reddened, she struggled lightly but did not loose his grasp, letting him to hold her hand; her head hung even lower.*

Huang Rong was on the point of cutting up the chicken when they heard a voice behind them: "A third portion please; I will take the back-end portion!"

The two youngsters jumped; how had somebody been able to approach them without them realizing it? They turned and beheld a beggar, older but forceful. The man had a rectangular face, a goatee and vigorous but rather massive limbs. His clothes, frayed everywhere, were, however, very clean. He held with one hand a green stick, made from translucent bamboo like jade, and carried on his back a large red gourd. He looked so eager and impatient that one had the impression that if his portion was not offered, he was going to seize some by force! Before the two young people had time to answer, without much ado, he was already sitting down in front of them. He took his gourd, opened it, and a heady alcoholic perfume spread itself in the air. He thirstily swallowed several mouthfuls before capping it again. To Guo Jing he said, "A drink for you, little urchin!"

Guo Jing found the man rather impolite, but sensed distinctly that he was no ordinary individual, so he did not dare to show disrespect. "No, thank you," he said courteously, "I do not wish a drink at the moment, but you having one won't bother me."

"And you, little girl," the beggar asked Huang Rong, "Do you drink?"

Huang Rong shook her head. Suddenly, she saw that the hand which held the gourd had only four fingers; the index had been severed at the first knuckle. She started and thought of the conversation between the Taoists and the Freaks, which she had overheard outside the window of the inn the other day, concerning the 'Divine Nine-Fingered Beggar'. "Could this be a stroke of luck," she wondered, "that we meet by chance, that Elder? Let's try to probe him a little..." The eyes of the beggar were fixed on the chicken held in her hand and he salivated in anticipation. She could not stop secretly laughing. She then cut out the bird into two and the end portion was handed to him. Captivated, the beggar seized it and took a full bite. While devouring it, he did not cease praising, "Delicious! Delicious! Even I, who am the leader of all the beggars, could not improvise such a delicious 'Beggar's Chicken'!" Huang Rong smiled and offered the other piece to him.

"But no," protested the beggar, "neither of you have eaten yet!" This attempt at manners was in vain and purely a formality, since it did not prevent him from seizing what was offered to him. In a flash, there remained nothing but bones!

He tapped his belly then and exclaimed, "Ah, my belly, my belly! Hasn't it been a long time that you have been starved of such good chicken?"

Huang Rong burst out laughing, "By the greatest good chance, I prepared 'Beggar's Chicken' and here it has entered the majestic belly of the leader of the beggars! It's a true honor!"

The beggar burst out laughing, "Little girl, you are quite brave!" He withdrew from his pocket several gilded projectiles. "Yesterday," he explained, "I saw several individuals brawling about something unknown to me The

missiles which one of them launched shone like gold. I was the one who benefited from it and I took some of them. In fact, the inside is cheap metal, but outside, to look good, it is genuine gold. Little urchin, take them and have fun. When necessary, you can get some money for them."

Guo Jing shook his head, "We regard you as a friend, and when one invites a friend to eat, one does not accept payment!" By saying this he honored the Mongol's rules of hospitality.

The beggar, feeling thwarted, scratched his head. "Then, I am also embarrassed! I have no trouble begging for scraps from people, but today, you provided me such good chicken! Such a benefit, that I cannot return it, that..."

"Why speak about benefit and repayment, for such a small chicken?" Guo Jing said. "To be honest, we stole this chicken..."

"We took this chicken in passing," confirmed Huang Rong, "and you ate it as you passed here, very well done..."

The beggar burst of laughing. "You two," he said, "funny enough, I like you well. Good, if you have any wishes, just ask." Guo Jing, understanding that he proposed to help them, which again infringed the rules of hospitality, shook his head again.

But Huang Rong intervened. "In fact, this 'Beggar's Chicken' is really not a great thing; I have other small dishes that I would readily make for you to taste. Why won't you come with us?"

"Splendid!" exclaimed the beggar, enchanted. "Splendid!"

"What is your honorable name?" asked Guo Jing.

"My surname is Hong, and as I am the seventh in my family. You kids can call me Qigong."

"It is indeed him," Huang Rong thought, "The 'Divine Nine-Fingered Beggar! But he seems to be younger than the Taoist Master Qiu, so how could he be a contemporary of a master of the Quanzhen Seven? Hmm...Actually, my dad isn't old, yet he is a peer of Qigong! That must be explained by the incompetence of those seven old Taoists, who wasted their time!" She'd always held some resentment against Qiu Chuji for his wanting to force Guo Jing to marry Mu Nianci.

They headed south and arrived in a small town, where they took a room in an inn. "I'll go to the market," Huang Rong said. "It's better for you men to rest a little."

"She...isn't she your little wife?" Qigong asked Guo Jing with a smile while watching her leave. The young man reddened, not daring to agree nor to disagree. Qigong burst out laughing, and then began to drowse in a chair. More than one and a half hours later, Huang Rong finally returned and settled in the kitchen. Guo Jing wanted to help her but the girl laughingly closed the door. Another half an hour passed.

Qigong yawned, stretched, and inhaled deeply. "That smells very good," he said. "But what could that be? It's odd..." He stretched his neck, trying to look through the door of the kitchen. Looking at him, both impatient and longing, Guo Jing could not stop himself from secretly laughing. Delicate aromas emerged from the kitchen, but Huang Rong remained invisible.

Qigong could not hold still any longer; he scratched his head, rubbed his cheeks, rose, and sat down, again and again as if he were on burning coals. "I am like that," he confided to Guo Jing, "I have this unpleasant vice of

gluttony; when I think of eating, I forget everything else!" He opened his right hand and showed its four fingers. The man said, "The ancients said: 'index finger moves'.\* That's completely true! Each time I see or smell a dish that is original or exquisite, the index finger of my right hand cannot prevent itself from quivering. Once, because of it, I messed up an extremely important matter. Then, I got so angry with myself that, with a stroke of a knife, I sliced off my index finger!" [\*The Chinese word for the index finger, 'shi zhi', literally translates as 'food finger'.] Guo Jing started as Qigong sighed, "But I cut off my finger in vain, because my gluttony remained."

At this moment Huang Rong entered, smiling, carrying a large wooden tray which she placed on the table. On the tray, were three bowls of white rice, a wine cup and two large bowls containing the main dishes. Guo Jing smelled a delicious, extremely appetizing aroma. In one of the large bowls were laid out roasted beef sticks which, apart from their scent, did not seem exceptional. The other contained a clear soup the colour of jade, in which floated many red cherries and ten pink petals. At the bottom lay young fresh bamboo shoots. The association of the three colors - red, white and green, formed a multi-coloured whole that was extremely pleasant to the eye. The sense of smell was also engaged because the soup emitted the delicate scent of lotus. Huang Rong poured wine in a cup which she placed in front of Qigong while smiling. "Qigong, taste my dishes and tell me what you think of them!"

Hong didn't need to be told twice! Without even drinking the wine, he brandished his chopsticks and seized two meat sticks that he consumed voraciously. An exquisite taste filled his mouth; this was not mere beef! As he chewed, different flavor sensations struck him; sometimes oily and juicy, sometimes a succulent freshness. Flavors succeeded

themselves in complex and unpredictable variations, like the blows of a martial arts expert. Startled and delighted, Qigong examined the sticks more closely and saw that each of them was formed by four small intertwined sticks. He shut his eyes to savor the taste better. "Hmm," he said, "there is mutton thigh on one stick, another of pig ears in milk, a third one of calf kidney, and the last one...the last one..."

"If you guess," Huang Rong said with a grin, "you're really fantastic..."

She had barely finished her sentence before Qigong cried, "Deer thigh mixed with rabbit!"

"Bravo!" applauded the girl. "Well guessed!"

Guo Jing was completely stunned. "These meat sticks needed so much work!" he said to himself. "Qigong is truly astonishing to have been able to distinguish the five different meats!"

"There are only five meat types," Qigong went on, "but the blend of pork and mutton gives a certain taste, the deer with beef another... how many variations there are, that, I can't say?"

"If one does not count the order of the variations," Huang Rong said with a smile, "there are twenty-five, corresponding to the five times five petals of the plum flower. Just as the meat stick resembles a flute, this dish has a name ...it is called 'Plum Flowers Fall to the Jade Flute's Song' The 'variations' mentioned in your question means that there is a placement sort to the test. Qigong, you passed the test, you are the master of all gourmets!"

"Bravo!" the beggar said to himself. No one knew whether he applauded the name of the dish or his own skillfulness in

discerning the tastes. Then he placed two cherries in a spoon and said, laughing, "This bowl of lotus-leaf soup, with those bamboo shoots and cherries, is so pretty to look at, one almost regrets to have to eat it!" He swallowed and cried, "Ah!" Then he said to himself, astonished, "Eh?". He took two more and exclaimed again, "Ah! The freshness of the lotus leaf, the taste of the bamboo sprouts, the sweetness of the cherries, all that leaps to the taste buds; but what's more, the cherries, after having been pitted, have been filled something..."

"In the cherries," Qigong said while hesitating, "what's there?" He closed his eyes again, trying to recognize the taste. "This is lark's meat!" he mumbled to himself. "No...if this is not partridge, then it's turtledove! Yes, that's it, it's turtledove!"

He opened his eyes, saw that Huang Rong raised her thumb and couldn't help feeling very pleased with himself. "So what's the complex name of this soup with lotus leaves, bamboo sprouts, cherries and turtledove?" he asked.

"Elder Hong," Huang Rong said, "you haven't mentioned one more ingredient."

"Ah yes?" Hong said, astonished. He regarded the soup again. "Yes," he agreed, "there are these flower petals..."

"Exactly!" confirmed Huang Rong. "Can you figure out the name of this soup from these five ingredients?"

"If this is a riddle, I declare I've lost. Tell me quickly..."

"I'll give you a clue," Huang Rong said, "You just need to think about the 'Book of the Odes'!"

Note: The Book of Odes is also known as the Book of Songs (Shi Jing in Chinese), one of the Five Classics. The Four



Books and Five Classics were the standard texts that all scholars studied back in the day. The other four Classics are the Book of Changes (Yi Jing) - this one features a lot in the wuxia genre, Book of History (Shu Jing), Book of Rites (Li Ji) and the Spring and Autumn Annals (Chun Qiu). The Four Books are the Great Learning (Da Xue), the Doctrine of Mean (Zhong Yong), the Analects of Confucius (Lun Yu) and Minces (Meng Zi).

"Ah no!" Qigong protested, "I know nothing in the books!"

"The flower hints at a beauty's complexion," explained Huang Rong, "the cherries to her small mouth, isn't that right?"

"Ah, this is therefore the 'Beauty's Soup'?"

"No," Huang Rong said, shaking her head, "The bamboo is a symbol of modesty so it characterizes a gentleman, just as the lotus is the most eminent of the flowers. Thus, bamboo and lotus relate to a gentleman."

"Oh," Qigong said, "this is therefore the 'Gentleman and Beauty's Soup'?"

"What about the turtledove?" Huang Rong said. "Indeed, all these elements meet again in the first poem in the 'Book of the Odes' that finishes thus, 'The gentleman is in good company'. Thus, this soup is called the 'Soup of Good Company'!"

Qigong burst out laughing. "Since there is such a complex and strange soup, it's good that it has such a complex and strange name. Very well! Very well! You're a complex and strange little one yourself and I would like to know which complex and strange father sired you...In any case, this soup is truly exquisite and much better tasting than the

soup with cherries that I ate, approximately ten years ago, in the kitchen of the Imperial Palace."

"You have a pass to the imperial kitchen?" asked Huang Rong. "Tell me of a dish and I'll try to prepare something that will please you just as well."

Qigong devoured the soup and didn't have time to reply. He stopped when he had reached the bottom of the bowls. "In the Imperial Kitchen," he explained, "there are lots of good things of course, but nothing compares to the two dishes here... Ah, if there was it would be the 'Five-flavored slices of Mandarin Duck'. That was delicious, but I don't know how it was prepared."

"And it was the Emperor that invited you?" asked Guo Jing.

"Absolutely," Qigong said while laughing, "the Emperor treated me, but he didn't know it! I lived hidden on a big beam of the Imperial Kitchen for three months and tasted each of the dishes intended for the Emperor. If I found it to my taste, I kept it for myself; otherwise, I left it to him! The cooks believed that there were ghosts about!"

"This person really is excessively gluttonous," thought Guo Jing and Huang Rong to themselves, "but he is also insanely audacious!"

"Young lad," Qigong said, laughing, "your little girlfriend is the best cook in the world; your happiness is assured! Goodness! Why didn't I meet such a woman when I was young?" He seemed sincerely sorry. Huang Rong, with a hint of a smile, prepared the remainder for Guo Jing and herself. One bowl of rice was more than enough for her, while the young man put away four big bowls. As for the exquisite arrangement, it did not seem to make a difference to him.

Qigong shook his head while sighing. "Like a bull chewing on peonies! What a shame! What a shame!" Huang Rong put a hand in front of her mouth to stop herself from laughing.

"Bulls... do they like peonies?" Guo Jing asked himself. "There are many bulls in Mongolia but no peonies; indeed I have never seen bulls eating peonies. But why does he keep saying 'What a shame'?"

Qigong patted his stomach and said, "Good. You are both practitioners of martial arts; I saw that right away. The little one that went to so much trouble to prepare such exquisite dishes for me certainly has a devious motive, such as, persuading me to give you some instruction. Is that not correct? Good, I recognize that after having eaten so well, it would be inconsiderate of me to leave without giving something in return. Come, come with me!" He took up his gourd and bamboo cane, and went out.

Guo Jing and Huang Rong followed until they were outside of town. "What do you want to learn?" Qigong demanded of Guo Jing.

"Martial arts are so varied," said the young man to himself, "if I want to learn something, how is he so sure that he'll be able to teach it to me?"

While he reflected, Huang Rong had begun to speak. "Qigong, his kung fu is inferior to mine so he gets angry often because he's always trying to best me."

"When did I get angry?" Guo Jing protested. Huang Rong glanced at him, telling him to be quiet.

"For my part," Hong Qigong said while laughing, "I have the impression that all his movements are firm and assured; that means that he has a good basis of neigong. How would

he be inferior to you? Why don't you two match skills a little?"

Huang Rong moved aside some steps and called, "Jing'Ge ge, come on!" Guo Jing hesitated.

"If you don't show what you're capable of," Huang Rong said, "how do you expect this Elder to correct you? Get ready!" She jumped at him and attacked with a palm stroke; Guo Jing blocked the blow, but she already had changed tactics, and attacked with a kick.

"Well done, little one!" Qigong said. "Pretty move!"

"Fight seriously," Huang Rong advised in a low voice.

Guo Jing concentrated and executed conscientiously the powerful 'Southern Mountain Palm' taught by Nan Xiren. Huang Rong defended herself nimbly, jumping upwards and back. Then suddenly, she modified her technique and executed the 'Peach Blossom Island Divine Sword Palm' technique, created by her father. This palm technique resembled its name, 'Divine Sword', for it was adapted from a sword technique. She moved her arms in all directions; her opponent was encircled by the palm shadows, unable to determine if they were feigned or real. It was as though the wind had arisen in the woods dropping a thousand flowers. The beauty of the gestures resided in their lightness and their aerial grace; so well that Huang Rong resembled a butterfly taking flight. Since her neigong lacked power, her blows were not as violent and as terrifying as they should have been. It mattered little, for Guo Jing, stunned by the multiplicity of the shadows in front of his eyes, had lost all means to resist. In some seconds, he received four palm blows, on the shoulders, on the chest and on the back. He was not injured, since Huang Rong had not struck with force. She stepped back with a smile.

"Well done, Rong'er!" Guo Jing exclaimed with genuine admiration. "What a beautiful palm demonstration!"

"Your father is so powerful," Hong said in an icy voice. "Why do you want me to give lessons to this simple-minded one?"

Huang Rong was startled. "According to Father," she said to herself, "since he created this 'Peach Blossom Island Divine Sword Palm', he has not ever used it himself; how did this Elder recognize it?" "Qigong," she demanded, "you know my father?"

"Indeed, he is the 'Eastern Heretic' and I, the 'Northern Beggar'; don't you think that we had occasion to match skills?"

"He matched blows with Father," Huang Rong said to herself, "and managed to survive; that's really astonishing. Now I understand how the 'Northern Beggar' can be ranked alongside the 'Eastern Heretic'!"

"And how did you recognize me?" she demanded again.

"Just look at yourself in a mirror!" Hong replied. "Your nose and your eyes, are they not as those of your father? At first, I did not think about that; I only felt that your face appeared familiar to me, but your demonstration revealed everything! Do you believe that this old beggar does not recognize the kung fu of Peach Blossom Island? Even if I never had seen this palm, I would not doubt that a crafty fellow such as your dad would have been able to invent it. Heh...heh...and the names of your two dishes, what were they? 'Plum Flowers Fall at the Jade Flute's Song', and the 'Soup of Good Company'; it was doubtless your dad that invented them."

"You really can read minds," Huang Rong said, laughing. "Then, according to you, my dad is very strong, isn't that

right?"

"Of course he is powerful," Qigong said coldly, "but he is not the most powerful in the entire world!"

"Then, surely you're the most powerful in this world?" Huang Rong exclaimed while applauding.

"Not necessarily," Qigong said. "Twenty years ago, all five of us, 'Eastern Heretic', 'Western Venom', 'Southern Emperor', 'Northern Beggar' and 'Central Divinity', met at the summit of Huashan (Mount Hua), to match ourselves. The confrontation lasted seven days and seven nights. Finally, 'Central Divinity' revealed himself to be the most powerful, and we all gladly recognized it."

"Who then is this 'Central Divinity'?" asked Huang Rong.

"Your father never told you?"

"No. Father said that, in the martial arts world, there are more bad things than good and that there was no point for girls from good families to hear about it. He scolded me very fiercely; he didn't love me anymore so I ran away. He doesn't want anything to do with me..." With a sad face, she lowered her head.

"That old monster!" Qigong swore. "What ...!"

"I won't allow you to insult my father!" Huang Rong exclaimed.

"What a pity that I was always too poor!" Qigong exclaimed, laughing. "No one ever wanted to marry me! Otherwise, I would have had a kind girl like you, and never would I have left you..."

"Indeed!" Huang Rong said, laughing. "If I leave, what will you do for food?"

"Fair enough!" Qigong agreed with a sigh. "Well, to answer your question, the 'Central Divinity' is Wang Chongyang, founder of the Quanzhen Sect. But, since his death, it's difficult to say who's the world's most powerful."

"The Quanzhen Sect?" Huang Rong said. "There is a fellow called Qiu, another called Wang, and yet another named Ma. They are all cow-nosed Taoist priests. I found their kung fu rather pathetic! When they fought, they were either poisoned or injured in two or three stances."

"Ah yes? They were doubtless disciples of Wang Chongyang. It seems that, among his seven disciples, Qiu Chuji is the most powerful... But, it is certain that they are not even close to their martial uncle, Zhou Botong." Upon hearing this name, Huang Rong was startled; she was about to say something, then stopped herself.

Guo Jing, who had been content to listen to their conversation, interrupted, "It's true, Master Ma said that they had a martial uncle, but he did not mention the name of this Taoist master."

"Zhou Botong is not a Taoist," Hong Qigong replied. "He is a secular person, who was personally taught by his martial brother, Wang Chongyang... Eh, I say, my simple-minded one, you seem rather clumsy to me! Does your father-in-law, so fine and so crafty, really appreciate you?" Guo Jing, who didn't think he had a 'father-in-law', spluttered, not knowing how to reply.

"My father has yet to see him," Huang Rong said, smiling. "If you would be kind enough to give him some pointers, then, thanks to you, my dad will have some appreciation for him!"

"Little rogue," Qigong grumbled, "who has learned not even a tenth of her father's kung fu, but who has inherited

all his trickery and cleverness! I don't like your flattery or your toadying! And also, I never take disciples! Who wants a stupid one like that? You planned to get me to teach your dumb little husband! Huh, this old beggar will not fall into such a trap!"

Huang Rong bowed her head, red faced. She never had applied herself to learn martial arts. Her father himself was so powerful, yet she had not learned seriously from him; why would she want to learn from Qigong? But Guo Jing's kung fu was not up to the mark and his six Shifus considered her to be a 'little witch', so she rejoiced at having met a master such as Qigong. She hoped that he would pass on a little of his knowledge to her loved one so that, in front of his masters and in front of Qiu Chuji's Taoists, Guo Jing would not have to be afraid, like a mouse in front of the cats. Qigong was very gluttonous and always grinning but he was not stupid; he had seen through her act all along!

The old beggar, muttering to himself, left without a backward glance. The two young people stood silently for a long moment.

"Rong'er," Guo Jing finally said, "this Elder has a rather unique character!" Huang Rong heard a light rustle in the foliage above their heads and realized that Qigong had made a loop before returning, discreetly, to the top of the tree.

"He's a really kind person," she then said. "And his kung fu is much stronger than my father's."

"He hasn't shown his skills," Guo Jing wondered aloud, "how do you know that?"

"My dad told me so."



“What exactly did he say?”

“He said that, in today's world, there was only one person who could beat him, and that was the Divine Nine-Fingered Beggar, Hong Qigong. Unfortunately, since this Elder is always wandering, he has seldom had the occasion to see him and exchange pointers.”

In fact, after he had moved away, Qigong had used his incomparable qinggong and had returned to the top of the tree, high above the heads of the young people. He wanted to hear their conversation and to assure himself that they had not been sent by Huang Yaoshi to steal his skills. The words of Huang Rong filled him with pride. “So,” he said to himself, “Huang Yaoshi never wanted to accept my superiority; but deep within himself, he admires me nonetheless!” How could he have guessed that it was all pure and simple invention by the girl?

“I didn't learn great things from my father,” Huang Rong went on, “but that's my fault. I enjoyed having fun too much and never wanted to apply myself! Having had the good fortune to meet Elder Hong and had he wanted to give me some lessons, it would have been much better than learning from my father! What a shame I offended him without intending to!” Then she started to sob. At first she pretended and Guo Jing tenderly tried to console her. Then she thought about the death of her mother, the intransigence of her father and started to truly weep. Qigong, atop his tree, was nearly convinced.

“I heard father say,” Huang Rong continued while sobbing, “that Elder Hong had an exceptional skill of incomparable power that even Wang Chongyang feared. It's called... It's called... What is it called? I can't remember... Anyway, I had it on the tip of my tongue all this time and I wanted to beg

him to teach it...to you- it's called...it's called..." Indeed, she did not know of any such skill and talked in a rambling way.

Hearing her hesitate, seemingly searching for the name without finding it, Qigong could not hold back and cried as he jumped to the foot of the tree, "It is called the 'Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms'!" Guo Jing and Huang Rong bounded up in surprise, one's surprise was real, the other's was feigned...

"Ah, Elder Hong," Huang Rong cried, "how did you get up in the tree? By flying? Yes, that's it, the 'Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms'! Exactly! How could I have forgotten it? Father often told me that the kung fu that he admired most in the world was the 'Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms'!"

Qigong was delighted. "Then your dad knows what the truth is! I believed that, after the death of Wang Chongyang, he considered himself to be the most powerful in the world!" He turned towards Guo Jing. "Indeed, your kung fu isn't inferior to that of your little friend. The problem is that your palm technique is not at all up to the mark. Little girl, you return to the inn!"

Huang Rong realized that he was going to give a lesson to Guo Jing and she went away, well satisfied. Qigong addressed Guo Jing solemnly, "You will kneel down and promise me that, without my permission, you will not transmit my kung fu to anyone else, not even to your crafty little woman!"

Guo Jing was greatly embarrassed. "If Rong'er insists that I teach her," he said to himself, "how can I refuse?" "Sir," he said, "I do not want to learn from you. What does it matter if she is more skilled than me?"

"And why not?" Hong asked.

"If she wants me to teach her, I cannot refuse without offending her and I cannot accept without offending you..."

"Simple-minded though you are," Hong Qigong said, laughing, "you have a good heart and you speak directly. That is good. Very well, I will teach you a stroke called 'The Proud Dragon Shows Remorse'. I would imagine that Huang Yaoshi has enough pride that he won't, although he would desire to, copy my superior skills. In any case, our schools are completely different; I cannot learn his kung fu and he cannot learn mine..." At that, he bent his left knee, pivoted and straightened his arm, made a circle with the upright hand and pushed outwards with the other. His palm touched a great pine and 'craack', its trunk snapped! Guo Jing stood petrified, shocked by the power contained in this blow.

"This tree could not move," Qigong said, "if it were human, it would obviously try to avoid the blow. The difficulty of this technique is to strike precisely so that your opponent cannot, no matter what, avoid it and so well that once you land your blow, 'craack', the enemy will collapse like this pine!" He repeated the demonstration twice, explaining in detail how to concentrate and project the internal energy. It was only one stroke, but the lesson took more than an hour.

Guo Jing was not clever but he had a good basis in neigong. To learn a move such as this, made with simple movements but having unequaled power, suited him perfectly. He trained conscientiously and, at the end of two hours, had grasped the majority of this technique...

"In that little imp's technique," Hong said, "there are many more feints than real attacks. If you try to follow her, she will run around you as if you were a donkey and you will always fall. You will never be as quick as her. You will think that, after all these feints, the next blow will be real, but no,

it will be a feint! And the blow following you will believe to be a feint, but she will strike a real blow and you will be in trouble!" Guo Jing nodded his head in agreement.

"Therefore, to fight her, the clever way is to completely put the thought of whether it is a feint or not out of your mind. When she attacks you with a palm blow, whether it is a feint or not, return it with a blow of 'The Proud Dragon Regrets'. Against the power of your attack, she will be forced to withdraw and defend herself; so much so that all her tricks fall into water!"

"And after that?" Guo Jing asked.

"What do you mean, 'and after that'?" Hong replied, his face suddenly darkening. "You great idiot, do you think she is able to withstand this blow that I taught you?"

"But if she can't withstand it," Guo Jing said, very worried, "won't she be injured?"

Qigong shook his head and sighed. "If, in such a blow one seeks only to send out the force and not to keep it, if one cannot somehow control its lightness or its power, firmness or softness, how can one consider himself a master of these unique 'Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms'?"

Guo Jing was eager to agree, but he had made a mental decision. "Since I haven't learned to control my force perfectly, I won't fight with Rong'er!"

"You don't believe me?" Hong Qigong said. "In that case, try it!" Guo Jing took up the position, imitating his senior's posture, picked a pine with a particularly slender trunk and struck it with a violent blow. The pine shook but was not at all broken.

"You big fool," Qigong said, "Why are you shaking this tree; to catch squirrels or to drop pinecones?" Guo Jing, red with shame, laughed with an air of denial, not knowing how to reply.

"I already demonstrated it for you." Hong Qigong said. "It is necessary to put the opponent in a position such that it cannot back up or get away. Your blow just now had enough force, but all the pine needed to do is shake itself a little for it to escape the full force. It is necessary that you learn to approach and strike in such a way that the tree cannot budge, in order to be able to break it in one go."

This was, for Guo Jing, enlightening. "Then," he cried joyously, "It's necessary for the force to be particularly swift, delivered in such a way that the opponent has no time to defend himself!"

Qigong shot him a bleak look. "Absolutely! That goes without saying! You've sweated blood for such a long time and you only now understand this truth? One really can say that you aren't clever! For this stroke, known as 'The Proud Dragon Shows Remorse'- its essence is not found in the word 'Proud' but rather in the word 'Remorse'. If one concentrated only on pure violence, brute power, a little force in the muscles would suffice. If that were true, how could this technique be admired by Huang Yaoshi? As the old saying goes: 'The Proud Dragon itself regrets, the surplus will not last a long time'. This is the reason that if there is transmission, there must be retention. When you send out a force of ten, it is necessary to preserve within yourself a force of twenty. The day when you know to appreciate the full meaning of the concept 'Remorse', then you will be able to say that you have understood thirty percent of this stroke. Just as a fine old wine that has had time to age at first tastes not very strong, but afterwards it

releases its full heady flavor, that explains the concept 'Regrets'."

Guo Jing didn't understand anything about these matters, but he tried to memorize them in order to reflect upon them later. To learn martial arts, he always had adopted the same method: 'To that which others may assimilate in a morning, I will devote ten days!' Then he concentrated on the study of the palm technique. At first, the pine absorbed each of the blows that it received. Towards the end, these blows became more and more powerful, but the tree shook less and less. He realized that he had progressed and rejoiced somewhat. His palm had become red and swollen, but he did not treat it and continued to train with determination, never relaxing.

Hong Qigong, who had initially laughed at his persistence, had stretched himself on the ground and snored contentedly. Little by little, Guo Jing felt more comfortable as he attained a mastery of his energy...to carry the blow and to keep it. He brought his breath into his dan tian, advanced his palm violently, and withdrew his force immediately; so well that the tree did not move at all. Delighted, the young man repeated it in the same way while concentrating his force on the edge of his palm. He heard a 'craack', and the small pine broke apart.

"Bravo!" Huang Rong, who had seen the scene from a distance, cried. She approached slowly, carrying a heavy shopping basket.

Before even opening his eyes, Hong Qigong had smelled the delicious aroma of the food that she brought. "That smells good! That smells very good!" he shouted, jumping to his feet. He seized the basket from the girl's hands and opened the lid. He beheld a dish of roasted frogs thighs, a very fat duck suited to the 'Eight Treasures', and a big bowl of white

and immaculate money noodles. With joyful sounds, he pounced on the food, continuously praising as he devoured it. But, since his mouth was full, one couldn't understand anything he said. In an instant, the bowls containing the frog thighs and the duck were emptied. Realizing that Guo Jing again had not eaten, the old beggar felt a little ashamed of his gluttony. "Go on, eat up," he said, "these noodles aren't bad..." And as he felt really bothered, he added, "They are even better than the duck!"

Huang Rong laughed and said, "Elder Hong, you haven't yet tasted my best dishes!"

Surprised and delighted, the old beggar eagerly asked, "What dishes? What dishes?"

"You can't name them all," Huang Rong replied. "For example, stir-fried Chinese cabbage, steamed tofu, stewed eggs, sliced meat..."

As a well-informed gourmet, Qigong knew well that it was in the simplest dishes that the true masters really showed their talents. The same applied to martial arts...wondrous execution of the simplest techniques...that was the hallmark of the great masters! These words of Huang Rong's delighted him so much that his expression was almost imploring. "Good, good!" he said. "I always said that you were a brave little girl. Do you want me to buy you cabbage and tofu? Please?"

"It's not worth your while," Huang Rong said, laughing. "What you buy may not necessarily suit me."

"Fair enough," Qigong said. "No other but you can choose your ingredients."

"Just now," Huang Rong said, "I saw him break the trunk of a pine; he's already more powerful than me!"

"Not at all," Hong Qigong protested, shaking his head. "He isn't up to standard at all! It's necessary that the point where the trunk breaks be perfectly neat. Look, it's all twisted like a saw's teeth...what pathetic kung fu! Besides, this pine is as slender as a stick, no, as slender as a toothpick! This kid isn't up to the mark at all!"

"But if he attacks me with this palm," objected Huang Rong, "I will not be able to defend myself. This is all your fault! If he bullies me later, how will I resist?"

Qigong, who wanted to get back into her good books and did not want to keep annoying her, clearly saw that she was being devious. "So what, according to you, must I do?"

"Teach me a skill with which I can beat him. After that, I'll cook for you."

"Very well, we're agreed," Qigong said. "He only learned a single blow; it's easy to beat him. I will teach you a fist technique called 'Wandering Strides'." No sooner had he finished speaking, he rose to his feet to demonstrate. He jumped to the right and to the left, with grace and nimbleness, while his big sleeves flew...

Huang Rong, quick to learn, silently memorized every movement. When the old man had finished the complete chain, she had already half-learned it. After he had given all the supplementary instructions, it didn't take more than two hours for the girl to execute perfectly the thirty-six movements of the 'Wandering Strides'. In the end, she executed the skill at the same time as Qigong. They moved together and leaped in concert, the one to right, the other to the left, twirling like a jade swallow and gliding like a great eagle in the skies. At the end of the thirty-six movements, they landed on their feet at the same time.



While looking at each other they burst into laughter and Guo Jing applauded vigorously.

"This little one is a hundred more intelligent times than you," Hong Qigong said to Guo Jing.

"So many movements and variations," marveled the latter while scratching his head, "how did she learn so quickly? And how does she manage not to forget? Me, when I learn the second movement, I've already forgotten the first one!"

Qigong burst out laughing, "Indeed you absolutely cannot learn this 'Wandering Strides'! Even if you memorized the steps, you are incapable, in practice, of producing the spirit of striding! Executed by you so painstakingly and clumsily, this fist technique would become a real chore!"

"You've got a point!" Guo Jing laughingly conceded.

"The 'Wandering Strides'," Hong said, "is a kung fu that I practiced in my youth. I taught it to the little girl because it compliments her style of kung fu. It actually doesn't match my current kung fu style.. Thus, I haven't used it myself once during the past ten years." What he implied was that the 'Wandering Strides' was a lot less powerful than the 'Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms'.

Huang Rong was delighted. "Elder Hong, if I beat him again he'll surely be unhappy; please teach him some other blows." She herself had no real intention to learn and it was only a pretext to push the old beggar to give more lessons to her love. If she really had wanted to learn martial arts, she had at her disposal a great master in the person of her father, all of whose skills she never could have learned.

"This dumb kid," Hong said, "He hasn't even fully digested the single blow that I taught him. He's bitten off more than

he can chew! As long as you prepare me lots of dishes and I will grant all your wishes!"

"Very well then," Huang Rong said, smiling. "I'll leave for the market." Hong Qigong laughed heartily and returned to the inn leaving Guo Jing alone in the pine forest where he resumed training with determination, late into the night.

That night, Huang Rong indeed prepared a cabbage dish and a plateful of tofu for Qigong. She had carefully selected the most tender cabbage heart, then she stir-fried with chicken oil and duck leg filaments. But the plateful of tofu was really extraordinary - she had cut a ham in two and then dug twenty-four small spherical cavities in which she placed balls of tofu, before closing the ham and beginning to steam it. At the end of cooking, the flavor of the ham had passed into the tofu, while the ham itself was left out. After tasting this dish, Hong was naturally overwhelmed. This steamed tofu had a name inspired by Tang poetry and was called 'Full Moon Night on the Twenty-four Bridges'. [Note: This refers to poetry composed during the Tang dynasty (618-907 AD). The most famous poets of the era were Li Bai (sometimes known as Li Po) and Du Fu.] If the girl had not had at her disposal the family technique called 'The Orchid Skims the Point', her ten nimble and delicate fingers would not have been able to cut twenty-four small balls in the fragile mass of the tofu. To do it demanded as much delicacy as engraving characters on a grain of rice or sculpting a boat in a nutshell. It would have been easy to cut pieces of tofu in cubes, but where has one seen square full moons?

After dinner, each retired to bed. Hong Qigong was astonished to see Guo Jing and Huang Rong going to separate rooms. "Huh? Aren't you husband and wife? Why don't you sleep in the same room?"

Huang Rong, who had joked with him without reserve, felt embarrassed. Her cheeks blushing and looking upset she said, "Elder, if you continue to talk nonsense, I won't cook for you tomorrow!"

"What's this?" Hong was astonished. "When did I talk nonsense?" After a moment's reflection, he realized, "I'm old and senile, indeed," he said, laughing. "You're clearly dressed like a girl and not a wife. You are therefore promised to each other secretly, without the consent of parents or a matchmaker or a wedding ceremony. Don't worry; I will be your go-between. If your father does not accept, I'll challenge him to a duel and we'll fight, my goodness, for seven days and seven nights if we have to, until he yields!"

Huang Rong was worried about this matter and she feared that her father would not like Guo Jing. The words of the old beggar filled her with joy and she returned to her room, her face radiant.

The next day, Guo Jing went back to the pine forest at dawn. He practiced about twenty rounds with much sweat and rejoiced at the progress he accomplished. Suddenly he heard a voice speaking amongst the trees.

"Shifu," a voice said, "we must have traveled more than thirty li this time, isn't that right?"

"Indeed," replied another voice, "you've achieved some progress in endurance..."

This voice seemed very familiar to Guo Jing, who then saw four individuals appear, the first of which had white hair and ruddy complexion. It was none other than his number one enemy, Liang Ziwing, the 'Ginseng Immortal'! He shivered internally and took to his heels. But Liang Ziwing had already recognized him: "Where do you think you're

going?" he called out while leaping forward in pursuit. The other three men were his disciples and seeing their Shifu running after an enemy, they split up in order to surround the young man.

"I need to get out of the pine forest and back to the inn in order to be safe," Guo Jing said to himself, while running even faster. But the first disciple of Liang Ziwong barred his way and shouted, while crossing two palms, "Little bastard, kneel!"

He attacked with a technique of qinna [capture and control] taught by his master and sought to seize Guo Jing by the chest. The young man bent his left leg slightly; with his extended arm turned in, he made a circle with his right palm and struck out powerfully. It was precisely the blow that he had just learned, 'The Proud Dragon Shows Remorse'. His opponent felt the sudden power and attempted to evade it, but it was so powerful that it broke his arm and threw him a distance of a zhang [3.3m /11+ ft] or so, making him lose consciousness. Guo Jing never would have believed that his blow was going to be so strong but could not delay a moment and resumed his flight.

Surprised and irritated, Liang Ziwong jumped in front of him. Guo Jing had just left the pines when he found the 'Ginseng Immortal' in front of him. Very frightened, he got in position and launched once again his newly learned 'The Proud Dragon Shows Remorse'. Liang Ziwong did not know this blow but, sensing its power, knew that he could not handle it. He had to roll to the earth to avoid it. Guo Jing took the opportunity to flee again.

When Liang Ziwong recovered, the young man had reached the front of the inn. Guo Jing hollered, "Rong'er, disaster! It's the evil one that wants to drink my blood!"

Huang Rong poked her head out the window. "How did that old monster get here?" she asked herself. "That's fine; I'll try out this new 'Wandering Strides', which I have just learned, on him. Jing ge ge," she cried. "Don't be afraid of that old crust. Begin the fight; I'll come to help you and we'll teach him a good lesson!"

"Rong'er doesn't know the power of this old monster," Guo Jing said to himself, "that's why she speaks so recklessly." But Liang Ziwong had already jumped on him. In the face of the violence of the attack, the young man had no other option but to launch once more his 'The Proud Dragon Regrets'. Liang Ziwong twisted and dodged several feet to the side, but his extended arm was almost touched by the force of the palm and it left a burning and painful feeling. The 'Ginseng Immortal', frightened inside, was amazed that this kid, in the space of some few months, had progressed so much. "This must be," he thought, "due to the absorption of the precious blood of the snake." This thought absorbed him and he jumped again to the attack. Guo Jing defended himself again with the same blow. Conscious that he could not oppose it, Liang Ziwong retreated. Noting that the young man seemed not have at his disposal other such fearful blows to press his advantage, Liang's fear lessened. "Little idiot," he shouted, "Do you know only that one blow?"

Guo Jing tumbled right into his trap, "With even this one blow," he replied, "you still won't be able to avoid it!" He advanced, launching once again his 'The Proud Dragon Shows Remorse'. Liang Ziwong dodged and jumped behind Guo Jing to attack him. He turned and attempted to attack again in the same manner, but his opponent once more slipped behind him. The young man, who only knew how to make frontal attacks, was completely disturbed and could not manage to face him.

Seeing him on the verge of losing, Huang Rong called out, "Jing ge ge, let me take care of him!" She sprang forward and interposed herself between the two fighters, attacking Liang Ziwing with palms and kicks, who returned the attack. Guo Jing retreated two steps to watch them. Huang Rong had learned well this wonderful 'Wandering Strides' technique, but, aside the fact that she had learned it too recently to truly master it, Liang Ziwing was in fact a lot stronger one than she. Therefore, without the protection given by her soft armour, she already would have received several blows and certainly would have been injured long ago. Before even deploying the full thirty-six movements of the 'Strides', she was losing form badly. The disciples of Liang Ziwing, supporting their injured elder brother, observed the fight and, seeing their Shifu winning, shouted encouragement to him.

Guo Jing prepared to assist Huang Rong when all of a sudden Hong Qigong was heard to shout from behind the window, "His next blow is called 'The Evil Dog Blocks the Road'!"

Very surprised, Huang Rong observed that Liang Ziwing, legs firmly spread in the 'Horse Stance' and the fists stretched horizontally, was indeed taking the stance of the 'Evil Tiger Blocks the Road'. She couldn't prevent herself from laughing inside. "Hong changed the name of this blow, but how was he able to guess that it would be that one?"

Then she heard the old beggar shout again, "And his next blow is 'The Stinking Snake Inhales Water'!"

She realized that this was the 'Green Dragon Inhales Water', in which one lengthened the fist forward, thus unveiling a weakness to the back. The Beggar Clan leader had no sooner finished speaking than she had already slipped behind Liang Ziwing. He attacked effectively with

the 'Green Dragon Inhales Water', but the girl, warned in advance, had the advantage and attacked from behind. He avoided the danger only because of his exceptional technical mastery, which allowed him to change position right in the middle of a movement and to fly further away. He landed on the tips of his toes, surprised and furious at the same time. "Who is the powerful master that hides in the shack?" he shouted towards the window. "Why don't you show yourself?" But there was only silence behind the window. Liang Ziwing was lost in bewilderment. "How could this person succeed in predicting my blows?"

Fortified by the support of a great master, Huang Rong now feared nothing. She had regained the initiative and launched herself to the attack. Liang Ziwing resorted to killer blows so that the girl was forced to yield the upper hand. "Don't fear anything!" Hong Qigong shouted. "He will do a 'Monkey with a Rotten Bottom Climbs the Tree'!"

Huang Rong burst out laughing, raised her fists and attacked downwards. Liang Ziwing had chosen the 'Phenomenal Gorilla Climbs the Tree' and had, after jumping into the air, prepared to attack downwards. But Huang Rong had preceded him and if he continued the jump he would simply offer his head to her falling fists. He had to change his technique immediately! In a fight, if the opponent knew in advance all your blows, it would not take long for him to overcome you! The 'Ginseng Immortal', fortunately for him, was a lot stronger than Huang Rong and this allowed himself to extricate himself from a bad situation at the last moment.

He suddenly jumped back and shouted at Guo Jing, "If you persist in not fighting yourself, I won't hesitate to be ruthless towards this girl!" Changing his tactics and rained down blows like hail in a storm; so much so that Huang Rong absolutely could not adjust and Hong Qigong had not

the time to call out his blows in advance. Seeing his dearest friend in danger and reduced to dodging right and left, Guo Jing leapt forward and sent out once more his 'The Proud Dragon Shows Remorse'. Liang Ziwong jumped back.

"Jing ge ge", Huang Rong said, "give him three blows!" She turned and went back into the inn.

Guo Jing prepared, awaiting the approach of Liang Ziwong. No matter what technique the 'Ginseng Immortal' employed he replied with 'The Proud Dragon Shows Remorse'. His opponent, surprised and furious, wondered, "Where on earth did this dumb little fellow learn this strange blow and why only that one!" But even if he knew only this one blow the dumb little fellow had to be respected and Liang Ziwong could do nothing. Having reached a stalemate, the two held their positions.

"Silly boy," Liang Ziwong then shouted. "You'd better watch out!" He jumped at his young opponent, who continued using his time-tested defense. Liang changed direction in mid-flight and suddenly struck with three 'Accupoint Piercing Bones' that sped towards the young man from three different directions. As Guo Jing hurriedly dodged, Liang Ziwong thrust himself forward with lightning speed and seized him by the nape of his neck. Very frightened, the young man struck an elbow blow at the chest of his opponent. To his great astonishment, he had the impression that his elbow had sunk itself in a soft mass, like cotton.

Just as Liang Ziwong prepared himself to deal a fatal blow he heard Huang Rong scream, "Old monster! Look here!" Knowing that she was very crafty, he decided not to take any risks. He struck Guo Jing upon the 'Jianjing' accupoint so that he was unable to move, before turning his head. He saw the girl advancing slowly and saw that in her hand was a bamboo stick, its green as clear as jade. This froze him in



terror. "Hong..." he stammered, stunned, "Clan Master Qigong!"

"Why haven't you released him!" threatened Huang Rong.

At the time he heard someone calling out his blows before he even carried them out, Liang Ziwong was very surprised, but he had not thought that it could be Hong Qigong. Now, with the appearance of the green bamboo stick, he realized that the voice behind the window was indeed the person that he dreaded most in the world. Terrified, he quickly unsealed Guo Jing.

Brandishing the stick, Huang Rong approached him and said severely, "Senior Qigong wants to ask you how you dare to do evil here again? What impudence!"

Liang Ziwong dropped to his knees: "Your servant did not know that Clan Master Qigong was here," he stuttered. "Even if I had courage, I would never have dared to offend Clan Master Qigong."

"Nonetheless, this fellow is very powerful," Huang Rong said to herself, astonished, "How is it that he is so terrified at just the mention of Hong's name? And why does he call him Clan Master Qigong?" But she didn't allow any of her thoughts to show and assumed a threatening air. "And which punishment do you deserve?"

"I beg you to please say some words in my favor to Grand Master Qigong! Say to him that Liang Ziwong recognizes his great sins and that he implores Clan Master Qigong to spare his life!"

"Say a word in your favor? Why not? But several words, this would be really too much to ask. In the future, you mustn't cause trouble for either of us."

"Your servant offended you in his ignorance," Liang Ziwing said. "If you do not think harshly of me, then in the future, I will not dare to do..."

Huang Rong, very proud of herself, smiled and re-entered the inn hand-in-hand with Guo Jing. They found Hong Qigong sitting at a well-laid table with a knife in his left hand and chopsticks in his right, in the process of treating himself. "Master Qigong," Huang Rong said, laughing. "He's on his knees and doesn't dare to move even a hair."

Hong Qigong replied, "Give him a hiding to vent your anger; he certainly won't dare to defend himself."

By the window, Guo Jing saw Liang Ziwing kneeling petrified, with his three disciples behind him, also kneeling, all four looking miserable. He felt pity for them and said, "Senior Qigong, why not forgive him?"

"Little good-for-nothing," Hong reprimanded. "Someone comes here to trouble you and you aren't capable of defending yourself. Yet you accept the situation and you want to forgive your enemy! How can you be so foolish, I ask you?" Guo Jing wasn't sure how to reply.

"I'll take care of him," Huang Rong said, laughing. She took up the bamboo stick and went out of the inn. Liang Ziwing remained kneeling respectfully, his face full of fear.

"Hong Qigong said that if you persist in doing evil," Huang Rong thundered, "then it is absolutely necessary to cut your throat today! Fortunately for you my Jing ge ge has a good heart and he did not stop pleading your cause, so much so that Qigong finally agreed to spare you." She wielded the stick and struck him a blow on the buttocks while screaming, "You go in!"

Liang Ziwing spoke to the window, "Clan Master Qigong, I want to see you, to thank you for sparing my life!" Only silence greeted his plea. Liang Ziwing did not dare to rise and continued to kneel humbly. After a short while, Guo Jing came out and waved his hand, "Senior Hong is asleep," he said in a low voice. "Do not disturb him..." At that, Liang Ziwing got up, shot a hate-filled look at the two young people, and left along with his disciples.

Huang Rong, heart full of joy, re-entered the inn. She saw Hong Qigong lying on the table snoring. She touched him on the shoulder to awaken him, "Qigong!" she called. "Your precious magic stick has wonderful power. Since you're not using it, why not give it to me?"

Hong raised his head, yawned and said, "You speak so lightly about it" he said, laughing, "That is the work instrument of your teacher! A beggar without a dog-beating stick, how would that look?"

Huang Rong continued to tap it while simpering, "You have such powerful kung fu! People even fear the sound of your voice. Why would you need this stick?"

"You conniving imp!" Hong said, laughing. "Quickly, prepare some dishes for me and I'll explain it for you presently..." Huang Rong obeyed and quickly went into the kitchen to prepare three small dishes.

With his right hand holding a wine cup and his left squeezing the bone of a ham that he slowly gnawed, Qigong began: "The proverb says 'That which resembles itself assembles itself'. The lowly have to form a clan; the outlaws of the highway who rob the passersby form a clan, we others that freely pass our lives begging food leftovers also form a clan..."

"I understand," Huang Rong exclaimed while clapping her hands. "That old man Liang called you 'Clan Master Qigong', are you the chief of the beggars!"

"Precisely. As we wander, and someone sets the dogs on us, if we did not group together in a band, how could we survive? The ordinary citizens, in the north of the country, are for the moment under the authority of the Jin; in the south, they are under the authority of the Song emperor; but every beggar in the country..."

"Whether they be in the south or the north," interrupted Huang Rong, "are under your authority!"

"Eh, yes!" Qigong agreed with a smile. "This bamboo stick and this gourd have been passed on from generation to generation, since the end of the Tang dynasty. In other words, it has passed on from one leader of the Beggar Clan to the next. For we beggars, this is like the jade seal of the little emperor."

"Just as well you didn't give it to me," Huang Rong said, sticking out her tongue.

"Why not?" he replied.

"If every beggar in the country came to find me to sort out their affairs, that would be a catastrophe!"

"You are right," Qigong sighed. "Since I am lax and of a lazy nature, the weight of being Clan Master of the Beggar Clan is too heavy for my shoulders. Since I can't find a person to whom I can entrust it, I'll have to bear with..."

"So that's why old Liang fears you so much. If all the beggars in the country came after him, he would be in big trouble. If each one dropped a louse in his collar, that would

trouble him until the end of his days!" Hong Qigong and Guo Jing burst out laughing.

"No," the old beggar said at last, "it's not just for that; he's also afraid of me."

"Why is that?" she said.

"Nearly twenty years ago, he was committing an evil deed when I fell upon him..."

"What evil deed?"

"That old monster," Qigong hesitantly said, "believed a section of the adage: 'Gather the yin to nourish the yang...' He had obtained for himself several virgins and he violated their bodies, supposedly to obtain immortality."

"What's that, 'to violate the body'?" Huang Rong asked. The girl, whose mother had died in childbirth, had been raised and taught by her father. After the treachery and escape of Chen Xuanfeng and of Mei Chaofeng, Huang Yaoshi, furious, had crippled his other disciples and they had all fled. No others remained on Peach Blossom Island other than some mute servants. Because of this, no one had spoken to the girl of the things that happened between men and women. Since then, she had met Guo Jing and she felt a joy and an incredible softness in his company. When she was separated from him even for a moment, a feeling of melancholy and an unbearable solitude overcame her. She believed that being husband and wife meant nothing more than never parting from each other; that was why for so long now she had considered Guo Jing as her husband, without knowing the nature of conjugal relations. Her question therefore put Qigong in great difficulty.

"To violate the body of the virgins," the girl insisted, "is to kill them?"

"No," Hong responded, "when a woman undergoes such an outrage, this is sometimes more painful than death itself. The proverb says: 'To be dishonored is grave, to die of hunger is nothing'. That says well what I want to say..."

Huang Rong did not understand. "Does that mean to cut the ears or the nose with a knife?"

"Pah!" Qigong said, bothered, "not at all! Little imp, you better ask your mother when you get back home..."

"My mother is dead..."

"Ah!" said the beggar. "Then you will understand after your wedding night with our silly young fellow!"

Huang Rong reddened, understanding at last that it was a matter of shameful things. She said softly, "If you do not want to explain... Therefore, you fell on the old monster in the process of committing this evil deed...this was in past then?"

Qigong, relieved to see that she did not put up anymore embarrassing questions, continued, "Well, I intervened, that's right. I caught this rascal, gave him a good thrashing and pulled out all his hair! Afterwards, I obliged him to take those girls back to their homes and to promise solemnly that he would not try it ever again. If he resumed doing it, he would regret ever having been born! It would seem that, for all these years, he never broke his promise and that's the reason why I spared him today." He said then, "Goodness, did his hair grow back?"

"Oh yes!" Huang Rong said while bursting out laughing. "Pulling out all the hair...that would have been really funny!" The three finished the meal.

“Master Qigong,” Huang Rong then said, “now, even if you wanted to give me this bamboo stick, I wouldn't want it. But we cannot remain close to you all our lives! What if we come across this Liang fellow, and he says to us: ‘Well little brat, last time you sheltered yourself under the name of Clan Master Qigong and you hit me with his bamboo stick, today I'm going to avenge myself. I will pull out all of your hair!’ What will we do then? When my Jing ge ge fought with him, his one and only blow, ‘The Proud Dragon Regrets’, is of course powerful, but that means little all the same, true? I am sure that Liang will say in his heart: ‘Clan Master Qigong has kung fu of infinite power, but when it comes to teaching a disciple; this is really not that troublesome!’”

“I well know,” Qigong said, “that you utter all these stupidities, so provoking and threatening, so that I'll teach all my skills to you two! Well, so long as you prepare some good dishes for me, I won't disappoint you.”

Huang Rong, delighted, took Hong Qigong by the hand to go into the pine forest.

Hong imparted to Guo Jing the second blow of the Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms', called 'Flying Dragon in the Heavens'. In this stance it was necessary to jump into the air and strike from the top down; an extremely powerful attack. Guo Jing took three days to assimilate it. During these three days, Qigong took the opportunity to experience ten more delicious dishes even better than the others. Huang Rong, for her part, asked nothing from him for herself; provided that he continued to teach her loved one. This was more than enough to satisfy her.

In the space of a month, Qigong taught Guo Jing fifteen of the 'Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms', from 'The Proud Dragon Regrets' to 'Sighting the Dragon in the Field'.

These 'Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms' were Qigong's ultimate skills. He had originally learned them from his Shifu and they were instrumental to his reputation. The number of blows was of course, limited, but each of them was full of exceptional power. At the time of the first Huashan tournament, when the Five Supreme Masters measured themselves, these Eighteen Palms were not completely up to the mark, but they did give rise to respect and general admiration. Thereafter, Qigong often expressed his regret that if he had concentrated all his efforts to perfect this technique some years earlier, the title of "First in the Martial World" might not have fallen to the Grand Master of the Quanzhen Sect, Wang Chongyang, but to himself!

At first, Hong had no intention of passing on to Guo Jing more than two or three of these Eighteen Palms, which would have been more than enough for him to defend himself. But Huang Rong was really an unparalleled cook; every day she prepared new dishes of exceptional taste, never repeating herself. The old beggar could not resolve himself to leave. So, day after day, he ended up teaching the fifteen blows. Guo Jing did not understand the stances quickly, but the little that he learned, he retained and repeated day and night. Working with such determination he achieved a good mastery of the fifteen blows and what he lacked in power, time and practice alone could give to him. Thus, in a little more than a month, his kung fu had achieved such progress that he was no longer the same person!

That morning, after breakfast, Qigong said, while sighing, "My children, we've been together for more than a month, it's time we took leave of each other."

"Ah no," Huang Rong protested. "I have many more simple dishes for you to taste..."



"There are not endless banquets, but there is an infinity of dishes... I never have, in all my life, taught anybody for more than three days. This time, I've done that for more than thirty days! If this continues it'll be a catastrophe!"

"Why's that?"

"Well, you will strip me of all that I know!"

"You've started a good work; why not take it to the end! Teaching him the Eighteen Palms would be a real accomplishment!"

"Pah, that would be an accomplishment for you two, but not for me..." Huang Rong, worried, wondered what stratagems she could invent to get Hong to teach the three remaining blows to Guo Jing, but the old beggar did not give her the time. Flipping his gourd over his back, he left without speaking another word.

Guo Jing chased after him, but Qigong went so quickly that he disappeared in a wink. The young man raced into the pines and called, "Qigong, Qigong!" Huang Rong had followed him and added her calls to his. Suddenly, a shadow arose from the pines; it was Hong, who addressed them angrily, "Dirty kids, what are you still bothering me for? If you want me to teach you more, that is absolutely impossible!"

"You have already taught us too much," Guo Jing said. "I am more than satisfied, how could I want more? It's only that I did not thank you again for your kindness!" He knelt then and kowtowed, striking the ground with his forehead, several times.

Qigong's expression changed: "Stop," he shouted, "That which I taught you is nothing other than a suitable payment for the small dishes that she prepared for me. There has

never been a relationship of master and disciple between us!" At that, he also knelt and kowtowed in front of Guo Jing.

Stunned, he attempted to kowtow again, but Qigong extended a hand and touched a pressure point, freezing him with his legs half bent. The beggar released him only after having prostrated himself four times in front of him: "Remember," he cautioned, "Never mention that you kowtowed to me and that you are my disciple!" Understanding that he had a stubborn character, Guo Jing didn't attempt to contradict him.

"Grand Master Qigong" Huang Rong sighed, "you were so good to us and now we must part. I had the intention of preparing some simple dishes for you, but... unfortunately... I fear that this is not possible anymore..."

"And why not?" Qigong asked.

"Many people want to do evil to us... aside from that old monster the 'Ginseng Immortal', there are many more evildoers! One day, we will end up dying at their hands!"

"What is death?" Hong said with a smile. "Everyone must die one day."

"Of course"" replied Huang Rong while shaking her head, "it's not a big deal to die, but I'm afraid that they will capture me and, learning that I received your teaching and that I cooked for you, they will force me to cook for them all those dishes that I prepared you. This would be a stain on your reputation!"

Qigong knew well that the girl was trying to trick more skills out of him, but, the thought that someone might force her to cook, while he himself could not taste those succulent

dishes, caused a feeling of great anger. "Who are these villains that scare you?" he demanded.

"There is," Huang Rong replied, "a certain old monster of the Yellow River, Sha Tongtian. He eats in such a disgusting way! What a shame it would be for him to have my delicious dishes!"

"There's no need to fear Sha Tongtian!" Qigong said while shaking his head. "In one or two years, this dummy Guo Jing will be stronger than him. There's nothing to fear..."

Huang Rong mentioned the Tibetan monk Ling Zhi and Peng Lianhu. To which Qigong replied again, "Nothing to fear!"

But when Huang Rong mentioned the young master of White Camel Mountain, Ouyang Ke, Hong Qigong seemed taken aback. He questioned her about the techniques and moves of this new opponent, before nodding his head. "That's indeed him!"

Seeing the seriousness of his face, the girl became serious herself, "He's very powerful, isn't that right?"

"There's nothing to fear from Ouyang Ke!" Qigong said. "It's his uncle, the old West Venom, who is fearsome."

"The old West Venom? No matter how fearsome, he cannot be stronger than you, isn't that right?"

Qigong didn't reply. He thought for a while, before he stated, "At one time, we were equals. But that was twenty years ago... In those twenty years, he's surely trained harder than lazy and gluttonous me. Huh, but to beat this old beggar, nonetheless, won't be easy..."

"Then he certainly can't beat you!"

“We will see,” Qigong said, shaking his head. “Since the nephew of the old West Venom, Ouyang Feng, is after your head, we must be careful. I will eat your cooking for fifteen days. But let's make one thing clear...if, during these fifteen days, you present the same dish to me twice, I'll get up and say good-bye...”

Huang Rong was delighted. She decided to give the full measure of her talents. Not only did she not repeat the same dish, but she prepared infinite variations in the accompaniment of noodles and rice for every meal. Fried dumplings, steamed dumplings, boiled dumplings, fried rice, rice porridge, sticky rice, flower-shaped buns, rice flour noodles and a type of bean soup. Qigong, for his part, took pains to teach the two young people the art of adapting oneself to all the fighting positions, to react and to better defend themselves. But he never taught the three blows lacking from the ‘Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms’. Guo Jing, of course, deepened his mastery of the fifteen stances, and he equally increased the power of all the martial arts he had learned with the Six Freaks of Jiangnan. Hong Qigong had, before the age of thirty-five, practiced much diversified kung fu and learned innumerable fist and palm techniques. From among them he deliberately chose bizarre types for Huang Rong, but it was just as a joke. These techniques were beautiful to look at, simple and direct, but their real effectiveness in battle was far inferior to the Fifteen Palms Guo Jing had learned. Huang Rong desired only to have fun, so without really applying herself in this apprenticeship she had learned them to amuse herself.

Guo Jing was practicing his palms one evening, when Huang Rong climbed a tree to gather bamboo shoots and plums for an unconventional dish called ‘The Three Friends of Winter’, which has three distinct flavors.

Hong Qigong couldn't stop himself from drooling. Then he suddenly bent over into a thicket of grass and fished out a two-foot-long blue snake.

"Snake!" Huang Rong shouted.

With his left hand, Hong Qigong lightly pushed Huang Rong on her shoulder, forcing her back a few feet. The thick patch of grass rustled again, revealing more snakes. Hong Qigong struck each snake with the dog-beating stick on the center of its head. The blow immediately killed them. Huang Rong cheered. Suddenly, two snakes silently slithered behind her and bit her.

Hong Qigong knew the blue snakes, although small, possessed a highly venomous poison without comparison. Alarmed, he tried to think of a way to neutralize the poison. The sound of continuous hissing was heard, as a hoard of snakes materialized about ten zhang away. "How do you feel?" he asked.

"I'm fine," Huang Rong laughed. Fear struck Guo Jing when he saw the two snakes still hanging onto Huang Rong.

Hong Qigong told Guo Jing to be careful. In his anxiety Guo Jing had already removed a snake. He noticed blood dripping from its head. They were already dead. Hong Qigong understood. "Your father gave you his soft hedgehog armor." When the snakes bit Huang Rong, they were immediately killed by the spikes on her armor, which pierced their heads. Just as Guo Jing went to pull the other snake off Huang Rong more snakes emerged from the forest. Hong Qigong placed a yellow herb in his mouth and chewed. By this time, over a thousand snakes had emerged from the forest. Many more were out of the sight.

"Master Qigong, let's get out of here," Guo Jing said.

Hong Qigong didn't answer. Instead, he unstopped his gourd and took a large swig from it. He mixed the yellow herb with the wine, which he spit from left to right, creating an arc in front of the three.

When one blue snake attempted to cross the medicated wine, it immediately died. None of the other blue snakes dared to cross the wine after that. Indeed, the ones in the front attempted to retreat, but more snakes were emerging from the forest. Both groups crashed into one another causing a writhing chaotic mass. Huang Rong clapped her hands and shouted with pleasure. The forest suddenly emitted a strange noise just before three men dressed in white emerged from it. They used a pole to herd the snakes as if they were oxen. Huang Rong found this all amusing. But then she suddenly felt like vomiting. Hong Qigong struck at a snake with his dog-beating stick. He then took the snake and used two fingers to extract its gallbladder.

"Quickly swallow this," he said to Huang Rong. "Don't bite or chew it or you will feel pain." After swallowing the gallbladder, Huang Rong's chest immediately felt at ease.

"Jing ge ge, do you feel dizzy?" Huang Rong said. Guo Jing shook his head.

Because he had drunk the blood of the giant snake, Guo Jing had become impervious to over a hundred poisons. The snakes also felt fear whenever they smelled the scent of the blood on Guo Jing. When they emerged from the forest, they were really after just Hong Qigong and Huang Rong.

"Master Qigong, these snakes were raised by people," Huang Rong said. Hong Qigong nodded and angrily glared at the three men in white. The three men were also angry after they saw Hong Qigong feed the gallbladder to Huang Rong. They reorganized the snake line.

"You three bastards!" one of them shouted. "Are you tired of living?"

"No, you must be the three bastards who are tired of living!" Huang Rong shouted back.

Hong Qigong clapped Huang Rong on the shoulders in approval. The three men became even angrier. The sallow-cheeked, middle-aged man standing in the middle thrust the long pole at Huang Rong with a surprising amount of force. Hong Qigong pressed the dog-beating stick against the pole, which immediately stopped. Startled, the man pulled on the pole with both of his hands. Hong Qigong shook the dog-beating stick and shouted, "Be gone!"

The man stumbled and flipped over, landing right in the middle of all the deadly snakes. He had luckily eaten a herb earlier, so the snakes were unwilling to bite him. Shocked, the other two men took a step back. "How was it done?" they said. Indeed, the other man had fallen so hard that he crushed ten snakes and felt sore all over.

One of his companions, a fair-skinned man, held out the pole to the sallow-cheeked man to support him. They were reluctant to fight again.

"Who dares to stop our snakes with that herb?" the sallow-cheeked man said. Laughing, Hong Qigong paid no attention to them.

"Who are you to send out so many poisonous snakes to injure people?" Huang Rong replied.

The three men looked at one another, trying to figure out how to respond when another man dressed in white appeared at the edge of the forest. He walked through a narrow path between the snakes while fanning himself. Both Guo Jing and Huang Rong recognized him as Ouyang

Ke, the master of White Camel Mountain, whose presence amongst their ranks caused the snakes to disperse.

The three men welcomed their master and told him of Hong Qigong's amazing ability and the situation that had just transpired. Ouyang Ke was surprised. Then he nodded.

"In their ignorance these three servants offended the old senior," he said. "I apologize." Then he turned to Huang Rong and smiled. "Ah, the lady is here," he said. "I am at your service."

Huang Rong turned her attention to Hong Qigong. "Master Qigong, you should take care of this bad egg," she said.

Hong Qigong nodded and said to Ouyang Ke, "How can you lawlessly herd these snakes through the country in broad daylight? You obviously intend to use these snakes for reckless acts. Who do you intend to use them on?"

"These snakes have traveled a long distance," Ouyang Ke said. "They can't feed themselves in the conventional manner."

"How many people have you hurt?" Hong Qigong said.

"We've herded the snakes through the country," Ouyang Ke said. "Not many people were hurt."

Hong Qigong glared at the other man. "Not hurt many people!" he said. "Your family name is Ouyang is it not?"

"That's correct," Ouyang Ke said. "The lady must have told you. And what is the venerable one's name?"

"This man's rank is a generation above yours," Huang Rong said. "If he told you, he'd scare you to death!" But Ouyang Ke didn't get angry. He laughed instead and cast a sidelong glance at her.



"You are the nephew of Ouyang Feng, aren't you?" Hong Qigong said.

Ouyang Ke didn't respond, but the three snake herders shouted in anger, "Old man, how dare you use the given name of our master!"

"I say what others do not," Hong Qigong said with a smile.

The three snake herders continued to yell at Hong Qigong, when the beggar, who was on the ground with the dog-beating stick, suddenly appeared in sky like a large bird. He struck down three times so quickly that the three men had no time to react. Before their bodies hit the ground, Hong Qigong had already jumped into the air again.\*

"Good move!" Huang Rong said. "Why haven't you taught it to me yet, Master Qigong?"

When the three men arose they could not make a sound because Hong Qigong had hit them on the tiny muscle near the chin that connects to the jaw.

Startled, Ouyang Ke said to Hong Qigong, "Senior knows my uncle?"

"Ah, so you are Ouyang Feng's nephew," Hong Qigong said. "It's been over twenty years since I've seen the 'Old Poison'. Is he still not dead?"

Ouyang Ke grew angry, but he knew the level of Hong Qigong's kung fu was very high. And because he knew his uncle, he must also be a senior of enormous ability. "Uncle has often said that he would never die before any of his friends," Ouyang Ke said. "So he dares not go to heaven before you."

Hong Qigong looked skyward and laughed. "Good! You turn my words around and insult me!" he said. "Now, why did

you bring all these treasures?" he said, indicating the snakes.

"I have spent all my life in the West," Ouyang Ke said. "This is the first time I have ventured to the Central Plains [zhong yuan]. The journey is lonely and solitary, so I thought I'd bring these snakes along for some fun."

"That's a lie," Huang Rong said. "How can your journey be lonely and solitary with so many of your wives and concubines to accompany you?"

Ouyang Ke snapped open his fan and looked over it at Huang Rong. Laughing, he recited, "My distant heart held no one within, but today I have met its princess."

Huang Rong made a funny face at Ouyang Ke and laughed. "I don't need your compliments, just as much as I don't need you to miss me," she said.

Ouyang Ke was speechless: He was enthralled by the goddess-like Huang Rong and her pleasant expression.

"Your uncle rules the western region tyrannically, so obviously no one has disciplined you," Hong Qigong shouted. "So you've come into the Central Plains with the idea of doing as you please. Well, today, I will give your uncle face and leave you alone. Get out of my sight right now."

Ouyang Ke stopped himself from spitting out hateful words. Knowing himself to be no match for Hong Qigong, he began to retreat obediently, though his heart was full of distaste. "Junior bids you farewell. If senior makes it through the next few years without suffering any serious illness, please come to the White Camel Mountain for a visit."

Hong Qigong laughed. "Little punk, you dare challenge me to a duel? If I do come, it will have nothing to do with an agreement. Your uncle isn't afraid of me and I'm not afraid of your uncle. Twenty years before yesterday, in the early morning, a group of us fought one another and found ourselves to be evenly matched. We need not ever fight again."

His face abruptly changed. "You are still here in front of me instead of being far away!" Hong Qigong shouted.

Ouyang Ke was startled again. "I've only learned thirty percent of uncle's kung fu," he thought. "This man doesn't seem to be lying. I'll accept this loss of face for now and get back at him later." Ouyang Ke didn't respond, and the three men, with their chins still aching, made no sound. Casting a glance at Huang Rong, Ouyang Ke turned and walked back into the forest.

The three men then made strange noises to direct the snakes, but because of the injury to their jaws, their voices at their loudest only came out as a weak rasp. Like a wave, the snakes moved back into the forest, leaving a trail of gleaming slime across the ground.

"Master Qigong, do you know where these snakes come from?" Huang Rong said. "Were they raised?"

Hong Qigong gave no response. He took a swig from his gourd, used his sleeve to wipe off the sweat from his brow and let out a sigh of relief. "So dangerous; so very dangerous!" he said.

"How so?" both Guo Jing and Huang Rong asked.

"Those poisonous snakes were only temporarily blocked by my efforts," Hong Qigong said. "They would have soon been able to cross over. With so many snakes, they would have

been like a flood. How would we be able to stop them? Luckily, those people were inexperienced and didn't realize my ruse since I frightened them so much. If the 'Old Poison' had come, you two kids would have been in a terrible position," he added.

"We wouldn't stay — we'd run away," Huang Rong said.

"This senior wouldn't be afraid, but you two kids would run away," Hong Qigong laughed. "But how would you flee if the 'Old Poison' sent out one of his palms?"

"Is that man's uncle really that powerful?" Huang Rong said.

Hong Qigong laughed. "Powerful? 'Eastern Heretic,' 'Western Poison,' 'Northern Beggar,' 'Southern Emperor' and 'Central Divinity': Your father is the Eastern Heretic, and Ouyang Feng is the Western Poison. The number one martial artist, Wang Zhenren [Wang Chongyang], passed away. The remaining four of us, who fought against one another in eight pairs, were found to be equal. Is your father not fierce?" he added. "Is my own ability negligible?" [Note: Zhenren is a title for respected Taoist priests.]

Huang Rong had secretly pondered these points before and was not able to put the pieces together. "My father is a good person, so why is he called 'heretical' and 'evil?' I don't like his nickname."

"Privately, your father probably likes his nickname," Hong Qigong said with a laugh. "That man possesses a strange spirit. He follows his own unorthodox way — is that not perverse? I am convinced that the proper ancestry of all orthodox kung fu is through Quanzhen's teachings."

"You've learned Quanzhen's neigong haven't you?" he said to Guo Jing.

“Ma Yu taught me at length for over two years,” Guo Jing said.

“Indeed, indeed — you didn’t learn that in any short span of time,” Hong Qigong said. “Had you not, how would you be able to learn my ‘Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms’ if you didn’t possess a good neigong basis?”

“Who is Southern Emperor?” Huang Rong said.

“Southern Emperor is indeed an emperor [huang di],” Hong Qigong said. Guo Jing and Huang Rong were surprised.

“Do you mean the emperor of the Song?” Huang Rong said.

Hong Qigong erupted in laughter. “That kid emperor is only strong enough to eat from a golden rice bowl. If there are two, he wouldn’t be able to pick it up! Southern Emperor is not the Song emperor. No, this Southern Emperor possesses very powerful kung fu. Between the three of us, your father and I were slightly inferior. But the ‘southern fire overcoming the western gold’? Indeed, the ‘Old Poison’, Ouyang Feng, was unable to overcome his star.”

Guo Jing and Huang Rong wanted Hong Qigong to finish his story but the beggar was lost in thought and fell into silence. They didn’t press him. Hong Qigong looked skyward. His eyebrows creased as if he were pondering some sort of difficult problem. He walked back into the inn alone.

Suddenly, Huang Rong and Guo Jing heard the sound of tearing. As Hong Qigong passed through the gate into the inn, a nail got caught on his sleeve and tore a large hole into it. Huang Rong gasped in surprise. But Hong Qigong didn’t notice. He kept walking as if he were in a daze.

"I'll mend it for you," Huang Rong said. Huang Rong went to the proprietress of the inn and borrowed a needle and thread. Then she fixed the hole in Hong Qigong's sleeve.

Hong Qigong shook himself from his reverie when he saw Huang Rong with the needle in her hand. He abruptly snatched the needle and ran outside the inn's gate. Curious, Guo Jing and Huang Rong followed, only to see Hong Qigong throw the gleaming needle out. Huang Rong watched the needle arch and pierce a grasshopper. She shouted in delight.

"This will do," Hong Qigong said, looking satisfied. "This style will do nicely."

Guo Jing and Huang Rong waited for Hong Qigong to continue.

"Ouyang Feng, the 'Old Poison', loves to raise poisonous snakes and poisonous insects," Hong Qigong said. "Coming up with a way to deal with all those blue snakes is not an easy thing." He paused before continuing. "When I saw that young Ouyang and found him to be no good, and knowing his uncle who opposes everyone, I realized that you two needed some way to disperse the snakes since I might not always be around to save you."

Huang Rong clapped her hands. "You would use the needles to pin the snakes to the ground."

Hong Qigong smiled at Huang Rong. "This girl is so clever," he said. "You say one sentence, and she already knows the next one."

"You don't want to use the yellow herb anymore?" Huang Rong said. "You just spit it out with the wine and the poisonous snakes will refuse to cross it."

"That will only work for so long," Hong Qigong said. "I have to practice this stance 'Blossoms Rain from the Sky', which uses needles. The snakes will approach in the future, and I will throw out these needles, hitting each snake, one by one. After I get enough needles, I will go and kill all those snakes in about a fortnight." Both Guo Jing and Huang Rong laughed.

"I'll go get you your needles," Huang Rong said, before immediately heading off in the direction of the town market.

Hong Qigong sighed in admiration. "Jing'er, why don't you have her split her intelligence and cleverness in half and give one half to you?"

"Split in half her intelligence and cleverness?" Guo Jing said. "You can't split those apart."

Huang Rong returned from the market around the next meal time. She removed from a food basket two packages of sewing needles, and, smiling, said, "I bought every single needle in town. Tomorrow, all the men are going to get an earful from their women."

"Why?" Guo Jing said.

"Yelling at them would be useless!" Huang Rong said. "There's not a single needle left to buy in the town."

Hong Qigong burst into laughter. "Didn't you two kids want me to teach you projectile kung fu? Let's see how hard you can work. You two kids won't get another opportunity to learn from this old man. It turns out this old beggar was smart after all! By not marrying, I'm spared the torment of dealing with women." Laughing, Huang Rong followed him out.

"I don't want to learn Master Qigong," Guo Jing said.

“Why?” Hong Qigong said.

“Senior has already taught me so much kung fu that I haven’t practiced enough,” Guo Jing said.

Hong Qigong understood: Guo Jing refused to be greedy. The beggar had said he would no longer teach anymore kung fu to Guo Jing, but the recent emergency situation made teaching more techniques imperative. Nevertheless, if Guo Jing allowed Hong Qigong to teach him again, it would appear to be opportunistic. Nodding, Hong Qigong pulled Huang Rong by the hand and said, “We practice.”

Once alone, Guo Jing went out and practiced the first fifteen palms of the ‘Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms’ and thereby increased his understanding.

Huang Rong studied ‘Blossoms Rain from the Sky’ for ten days. She learned how to throw ten needles and simultaneously hit a person’s vital areas, but could not master hitting the vital points of multiple targets at once.

One day, Hong Qigong and Huang Rong were out practicing with the needles. The beggar threw them all at once. The needles fell to the ground in two groups — each ten feet across. Satisfied, he looked skyward and fell into contemplation. But his thinking was muddled, so he said aloud, “Old Poison, why did you train all those snakes?”

“With his kung fu already at such a powerful state, he can handle almost anyone near him,” Huang Rong said. “So what would the snakes be for?”

Hong Qigong slapped his head. “Of course!” he said. “It’s to deal with the Eastern Heretic and the Southern Emperor. Both the beggars and Quanzhen are numerous in manpower and the Southern Emperor is an actual emperor with many bodyguards and soldiers protecting him. Your



father is a cultivated intellectual possessing many strange and powerful skills, which can help him face multiple enemies alone. When the 'Old Poison' fights alone, no one in his generation can completely face him. But if his enemy brings a companion and so on, then the 'Old Poison' facing them alone is in a terrible position."

"Therefore, the 'Old Poison' raised the snakes to help him," Huang Rong said.

Hong Qigong sighed. "Us beggars often catch snakes and raise them for food," he said. "We've been able to do this with about seventeen or eighteen snakes. We sometimes even release them into fields at night to catch frogs. But the process isn't easy at all. Now, the 'Old Poison' has actually had the time to catch innumerable numbers of snakes. Rong'er, the 'Old Poison' has spent a great deal of time on this, which means he must be planning something."

"He is certainly planning something," Huang Rong said. "But luckily for us, his nephew revealed the snakes."

Hong Qigong slapped his head. "Of course, the Ouyang kid revealed the secret through his frivolousness," he said. "But what does the 'Old Poison' know about what others have? These thousands of snakes could not have come from the western region. They must have been collected from the mountains in the East. Although that Ouyang kid betrayed a part of the plan, he might not have completely revealed the whole scheme in which he plays a part."

"That's not a good thing," Huang Rong said. "Luckily, this 'Blossoms Rain from the Sky' style prepares us in advance to take care of those snakes when we meet them, as opposed to having to deal with them while fighting with the 'Old Poison' himself."

Hong Qigong hesitated. "But suppose he wraps me up and prevents me from throwing the needles," he said. "How would I deal with those thousands of snakes?"

Huang Rong thought for a while, "Just run away," she said.

"Bah!" Hong Qigong said with a smile. "What kind of method is turning around and running away?"

Suddenly, Huang Rong exclaimed, "I've got it! I just thought of a good plan."

Joyful, Hong Qigong said, "What kind of plan is it?"

"Just keep the two of us by your side," she said. "Should we meet the 'Old Poison', you will fight him and Jing ge ge will deal with his nephew. I will simply use the sewing needles to kill all the snakes. The problem is Jing ge ge doesn't know three of the strikes from the 'Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms' and might not be able to deal with those devious ones." Hong Qigong stared.

"You are the devious one," he said. "You just want to trick me into teaching your 'Jing ge ge' the last three palms. With regard to Guo Jing's moral conduct, I would teach him all eighteen palms without any hesitation. But when did this boy become my disciple? He is so dull that if I took him as a disciple, I would be giving people the right to laugh at me!" Huang Rong laughed.

"I'm going to buy some groceries," she said, knowing that food would make it harder for Hong Qigong to leave.

She went to the market and purchased many different kinds of vegetables and meats while making sure she bought ingredients with sufficiently unique tastes. With the groceries held in her left hand and her right practicing the "Blossoms Rain from the Sky" technique, she leisurely

strolled back to the inn. Suddenly, she heard the sound of a bell approaching. In the distance, she saw a lone, female rider dressed in white nearing the inn very quickly. Huang Rong saw it was Yang Tiexin's daughter, Mu Nianci, whom Guo Jing's teachers wanted him to marry. Huang Rong's heart turned sour and, as Mu Nianci got closer, she refused to make a sound. "What's so good about this girl?" she thought. "Jing ge ge's six masters and that ox-nosed priest of the Quanzhen Sect all want him to marry her." After more thinking, Huang Rong grew angry. "Let me go fight her and relieve some of my frustration," she thought. But when Huang Rong went to place the groceries in the inn, she found Mu Nianci already sitting at a table.

An anxious-looking innkeeper asked Mu Nianci what she wanted to eat and drink. "Bring me a bowl of noodles and some beef," Mu Nianci said. The innkeeper quickly left to fill the order.

"How is simple beef any good to eat?" Huang Rong said.

Mu Nianci looked at Huang Rong. At first she couldn't recognize her, but then she remembered it was the girl who had so suddenly left with Guo Jing. She exhaled. "Little sister is here too?" she said. "Please sit with me."

"Did that smelly scholar, the fat dwarf, or the other ones come too?" Huang Rong said.

"No," Mu Nianci said. "I came alone. They are all off somewhere together."

At first Huang Rong feared running into Qiu Chuji, but she felt joy after learning Mu Nianci was there by herself. Blinded at first by the possibility of the Taoist's presence, Huang Rong now examined Mu Nianci closely and noticed her small boots, dress and her hair entwined with a white flower, signifying that she was in mourning. And though she

had lost weight and wore a sad expression, Mu Nianci remained elegantly beautiful as opposed to pitiable. Huang Rong then noticed a dagger worn at Mu Nianci's waist.

"That is the dagger exchanged by Jing ge ge's parents with her parents to mark their marriage," Huang Rong thought. Unable to bear the thought, Huang Rong shouted, "Little sister, may I take a look at that dagger?"

The dagger was indeed the one Bao Xiruo gave away just before dying. It had been recovered after she and Yang Tiexin killed themselves and now served as a keepsake of the two adoptive parents.

Mu Nianci looked at Huang Rong and noticed her strange expression, but before she could do anything, Huang Rong had already reached out, taken hold of the dagger and casually removed it.

She looked at the weapon and noticed the two characters "Guo Jing" carved into its hilt. "This belongs to Jing ge ge," she thought bitterly. "Why does she get to have it?" She removed the weapon from its sheath. A cold air immediately emanated from the weapon. "Good dagger!" Huang Rong said. She put the dagger back into the sheath and placed it within her shirt. "I'm going to go give this to Jing Ge ge," she said.

Stricken, Mu Nianci said, "What?"

"The two characters engraved on the hilt proves who the rightful owner of this dagger is," Huang Rong said. "I'm going to give it to him."

Mu Nianci cried out angrily, "That is the only possession I have from my adoptive parents. How can you take it? Quickly give it back to me." She stood up and walked towards Huang Rong.

"If you have a problem, come and get it!" Huang Rong shouted as she ran out of the inn. Huang Rong knew Hong Qigong was asleep in the forest and Guo Jing was up on the mountains practicing his palms. She ran to the left.

Mu Nianci pursued anxiously, fearing Huang Rong would ride the red horse. She continued to chase until she heard a loud noise, which she followed.

Huang Rong had taken a bend into a clearing surrounded by tall, locust trees. She stopped there and laughed.

"You've won," she said. "You're the better horse. Now let us match against one another to see who gets the bride's dagger."

Mu Nianci's cheeks reddened. "Don't joke little sister," she said. "When I see this dagger, I see my adoptive father. Why did you take it away?"

Huang Rong's brow dropped. "Who is your sister?" she shouted. She immediately jumped at Mu Nianci with her palm extended.

Mu Nianci tried to dodge, but Huang Rong used the 'Palm of the Divine Sword Felling the Hero'. Employing the many and mysterious variations in the style, Huang Rong hit Mu Nianci twice in the ribs, causing a lot of pain. Angry, Mu Nianci turned to the left before also returning her own palm stroke, which was a violent strike.

"That is the 'Wandering Strides' fist!" Huang Rong shouted. "How is this possible?"

Mu Nianci was surprised upon hearing Huang Rong's shout. "This was the style Hong Qigong passed on to me alone," she thought. "How could she know about it?" Mu Nianci watched as Huang Rong retracted her left palm and

attacked with her right as a fist. After three moves, Mu Nianci recognized the style to be none other than the 'Wandering Strides'. Surprised, she jumped back. "Stop!" she shouted. "Who taught you this style?"

"I just figured it out myself," Huang Rong said with a smile. "What's so special about this rough and crude kung fu?" So saying, she attacked again with the 'Wandering Strides', employing its two central moves, 'Alms Bowl at the Door' and 'Seeing a Benefactor', in a continuous attack.

Mu Nianci became even more bewildered after avoiding another move, 'Traveling the Seas Without Worry'. "You know Senior Hong Qigong?" she said.

"He and I are old friends," Huang Rong said with a smile. "You can use this style. I'll use the kung fu I know and then we'll see who wins."

With a menacing chortle, Huang Rong immediately attacked. She did not use the 'Wandering Strides' style. Instead, she employed the martial arts taught to her by her father to get the better of Mu Nianci, whose skills were taught to her by Hong Qigong. How could Mu Nianci block?

Mu Nianci tried to flee but she couldn't. She watched a palm rise like a sword slashing across with a roaring wind. Feeling the spear-like force, Mu Nianci twisted her body to the side to dodge, but then felt pain in her neck as Huang Rong successfully hit her with 'Brushing the Orchid Blossoms from the Road'. The palm had struck the neck vertebrae precisely where the blood vessels regulate the body, hands and feet. After being hit, Mu Nianci's hands and feet immediately became numb and weak.

Huang Rong then stepped forward and pressed an acupoint on Mu Nianci's waist. Mu Nianci immediately fell over. Huang Rong took out the dagger and laughed, before

slashing at Mu Nianci's cheeks with ten different strikes. None of them hit — but they were only one inch away from striking flesh.

Mu Nianci closed her eyes, expecting death, but to her surprise she felt a cool air near her cheeks that didn't hurt. When she opened her eyes, she saw the dagger coming towards her eyes, only to see it stop next to her face. "If you're going to kill me, kill me," she yelled in anger. "Why all the threats and theatrics?"

"You are not my enemy, nor do I hate you," Huang Rong said. "Why would I kill you? You just have to swear one oath, and I'll release you."

Although they were indeed not enemies, Mu Nianci refused to even consider giving an oath. "Lady, you threaten to kill me because you want me to swear an oath," she shouted. "You must be dreaming."

Huang Rong sighed with admiration. "It would be a real pity to kill a beautiful lady of marriageable age," she said.

Mu Nianci closed her eyes and waited for death, but she heard not a sound.

After a moment, Huang Rong gently said, "Jin Ge ge and I have already shared our hearts. If you were to marry him, there is no way he would give you the same."

Mu Nianci opened her eyes. "What did you say?" she asked.

"I know you won't promise not to marry him," Huang Rong said.

"Who is it that you like?" Mu Nianci said in confusion. "Who is it you think I want to marry?"

"Jin Ge ge, Guo Jing," Huang Rong said.

"Oh him," Mu Nianci said. "What do you want me to swear?"

"I want you to swear a heavy oath that you will not marry him," Huang Rong said.

Mu Nianci giggled. "You put a dagger to my throat when I already cannot marry him," she said.

"Is it true?" Huang Rong asked joyfully. "How can this be?"

"Although my adoptive father betrothed me to brother Guo Jing, honestly..." she said before lowering her voice. "Honestly, my adoptive father, despite all his wisdom, neglected to prevent me from giving my heart to someone else."

"I've made such a bad mistake about you," Huang Rong said ecstatically before immediately un-sealing Mu Nianci's accupoints and massaging her numb hands and feet. "Elder sister, who have you matched yourself with?"

Mu Nianci blushed before cooing, "You've seen this person before."

Huang Rong tilted her head and thought for a moment. "I've seen him before?" she said. "What kind of person around this town is worthy of ascending to elder sister's level?"

Mu Nianci laughed. "In this world, this man is unrivaled by anyone except for your Jing ge ge," she said. "Elder sister, is he so crazy that he hasn't married you?" Huang Rong said with a smile.

"Is brother Jing crazy?" Mu Nianci said. "His character is honest, and his heart is chivalrous. I admire him very much. He treated my father and me very well that day when he



helped us at the risk of his own life. I am very grateful for that. This quality of man is very rare in the world."

Worried, Huang Rong pressed, "Did you say that you couldn't marry him just so I wouldn't put this dagger against your throat?"

Mu Nianci noticed how Huang Rong pressed the issue and concluded the imprudence she exhibited before wasn't far off. She grasped Huang Rong's hands and slowly spoke, "Little sister, your heart is already set on brother Jing. Finding another man his equal will be difficult even with all the thousands of men in the world, right?"

"Yes, I do believe it's very unlikely to find another his equal," Huang Rong said.

"If brother Jing heard your praises of him, his heart would be filled with joy," Mu Nianci said. "During the contest my father set up in Yanjing, a man defeated me."

Huang Rong understood. "I know now," she said. "The person in your heart is the Little Prince, Wanyan Kang."

"Yes, it is the young prince," Mu Nianci said. "He is the one my heart wants. He's a good person underneath. I can make him stop being rotten. "

Though she spoke softly, Mu Nianci's expression was very firm. Huang Rong nodded her head when she suddenly realized she felt the same way about Guo Jing as what Mu Nianci said in such simple words. They grasped each other's hands and sat side-by-side below the locust trees with the sensation of shared feelings. Huang Rong thought for a moment. Then she gave the dagger back to Mu Nianci.

"Elder sister, let me return this to you," Huang Rong said.

Mu Nianci did not take it. "Keep it — this is your Jin Ge ge's possession," she said. "His name is carved there on the hilt. With it everyday, I ..." She paused. "If I should carry it everyday, it wouldn't be very good."

Huang Rong lovingly took the dagger and stowed it near her bosom. "Elder sister, you are truly good," she said. After receiving the valuable dagger, Huang Rong was momentarily distracted from her thoughts. "Elder sister, what business has drawn you to the South alone?" Huang Rong asked. "Maybe little sister can help you?"

Mu Nianci blushed and lowered her head. "I don't have any pressing matters at hand," she said.

"In that case, I will take you to see Master Qigong," Huang Rong said.

Mu Nianci felt joy. "Master Qigong is here?" she said.

Huang Rong nodded before grasping Mu Nianci's hand and pulling her up. Suddenly, she heard a sound among the branches above. A piece of bark fell to the ground. In the distance, they could see one person's shadow jumping happily from locust tree to locust tree. After a while, they could tell it was Hong Qigong.

Huang Rong picked up the bark and saw characters carved onto its surface with a needle. "Two dolls like this are very good," she read. "But if Rong'er deliberately causes trouble again, then Qigong will hit your eldest child on the ear." The bark was not signed at the bottom. Instead, a gourd was carved in its place. Huang Rong knew Qigong carved the bark and couldn't help blushing. She knew Qigong had observed the whole fight and knew all about the particulars of the oath she wanted Mu Nianci to swear. Both people had entered the locust grove and did not even notice Hong Qigong. The pair walked hand-in-hand back to the inn.

Guo Jing, who was sitting inside after he finished practicing, was shocked to see Mu Nianci. He quickly said, "Sister Mu, did you see my masters?"

"Your respected masters and I left the capital together and went south to Shandong," she said. "We split up there, and I have not seen them since."

"Are my masters well?" Guo Jing said.

"Be at ease, brother Guo," Mu Nianci said with a smile. "They are not angry with you."

Guo Jing was indeed very worried, fearing his masters were very angry with him. He rose and fiddled with some tea and food as his simple mind was lost in thought. Mu Nianci turned to Huang Rong and asked how they met Hong Qigong. Huang Rong told the tale.

"Little sister, you are so blessed," Mu Nianci said with a sigh. "You spent so much time with Master Qigong that you lived like a little family. But I only wanted to see him and he is not here."

"He was looking after you," Huang Rong said comfortingly. "He would have revealed himself if I tried to injure you. If I had hurt you, how could he not have acted?" Mu Nianci nodded in acceptance.

Guo Jing thought this was strange. "Rong'er, why would you want to injure sister Mu?" he asked.

"I cannot say," Huang Rong said quickly.

Mu Nianci smiled. "She feared ... feared I would," she said without finishing. Although she started to speak of the matter, she felt shy about the subject.

Huang Rong reached out and tickled Mu Nianci's armpit. "You dare to speak of it?" Huang Rong said with a smile.

Mu Nianci stuck her tongue out and then shook her head. "How would I dare?" she said. "Don't you want me to swear an oath?" Huang Rong spluttered as she recalled trying to force Mu Nianci into swearing to not marry Guo Jing. Both her cheeks turned a bright red. Seeing their shared emotions, Guo Jing felt great happiness.

After eating, the three went into the middle of the forest and strolled about as they idled away their day. Huang Rong asked Mu Nianci how she had received instruction from Hong Qigong.

"It happened when I was very young," Mu Nianci said. "I followed father to a river in Henan province. We stopped at an inn, and while I played at the entrance, I saw two beggars lying on the ground, bleeding profusely. No one was willing to help them for fear of getting themselves dirty."

Huang Rong made the connection. "Oh, so you showed compassion!" she said. "You tended their injuries."

"I could not do much for their injuries," Mu Nianci said. "But I pitied them and took them to father's room where I cleaned their wounds and bandaged them. When my father returned, he said I did the right thing, and then sighed and said how his former wife was kind hearted as well. Then my father gave the two beggars some money to help them with their injuries. They thanked him and left. After several months, we went to Xinyang, where we ran into those two beggars again, who had recovered from their wounds. They took me to a temple where I first met Hong Qigong. After praising me, he taught me the 'Wandering Strides' form,

which took three days. On the fourth day, when I returned to the temple, the master had gone.”

Huang Rong said, “Master Qigong won’t allow us to teach his skills to others. But if you, my sister, would like to learn my father’s skills, I could spend the next few days teaching you some of them.” When she found out that Mu Nianci did not want to marry Guo Jing, a burden was lifted from her heart. Now she felt that she was a really nice person, so she wanted to make her a gift.

Mu Nianci said, “Many thanks, but at present I have some urgent matters to attend to. In future I would ask you even without you suggesting it.”

Huang Rong wanted to ask her what was it but one look at her face and Huang Rong knew she did not want to talk about it and thought, “From her shyness, it seems like she’s made up her mind. If she doesn’t want to mention it, it’s alright.”

Mu Nianci left the inn around noon in a hurry and only returned after dusk. Huang Rong noticed the joyful expression on her face but pretended that she did not notice. After their meal, the two ladies retired. Huang Rong saw her cheek resting on her palm and her heart seemed full of emotions, so she pretended to sleep. After a while, she saw her reach into her bundle and take something out, kiss it lightly and look at it fondly. Huang Rong looked over her back and saw that it was a piece of finely-embroidered handkerchief.

Suddenly Mu Nianci jerked around and the handkerchief fluttered. Huang Rong was shocked and immediately shut her eyes while her heart pounded. She only heard the slight breeze in the room and carefully lifted her eyelid. She saw Mu Nianci pacing around the room executing moves

randomly. She said to herself, "Hey, that's the handkerchief she snatched from that young prince during their sparring match." She saw Mu Nianci smiling to herself, and felt that she was reminiscing of that day's events as she was imitating Wanyan Kang's movements and actions. She did that for some time before walking near her bedside.

Huang Rong closed her eyes tightly as she knew Mu Nianci must have been looking in her direction. After a brief moment, she sighed, "You're really beautiful!" She suddenly turned around and opened the door and walked out. Huang Rong became curious and gave pursuit, utilizing her lightness kung fu [Qinggong] to follow her. Her Qinggong was better than Mu Nianci's, but she kept her distance to evade detection. She saw her jump onto a roof and glance around. Mu Nianci then jumped to a larger building to the south. Huang Rong had been visiting the place daily to buy groceries, and knew that this was a rich man's house, so she thought, "Most likely she'd run out of money, so she came here to 'get' some."

Huang Rong saw that the door was brightly painted and there were two large lanterns suspended at the door inscribed with the words, "The Great Jin Kingdom's Envoy" and there were four Jin soldiers guarding the door. She had passed this door numerous times but had never seen this before, so she thought, "She wants to rob the Great Jin's bounty; that's great, after she's done I can also help myself." She then followed Mu Nianci to the back courtyard and saw her hide at every other corner, so she followed suit.

They saw the candlelight coming from the kitchen and there was a man's shadow there pacing about the room. Mu Nianci cautiously walked over and gazed at this shadow. After some time, the shadow was still pacing around while Mu Nianci was starrng at him motionlessly. Huang Rong became impatient and thought, "Sister Mu is hesitating;

why doesn't she just barge in and immobilize him?" She went around the other side and thought, "I'll help her by immobilizing him and hiding in one corner to surprise him." Just as she was about to enter through a window, she suddenly heard the door open and a man went in, saying, "Reporting, sir, the Southern Imperial Court will send a special envoy here the day after tomorrow." The man nodded and the messenger left.

Huang Rong thought, "So the guy inside is a Jin nobleman, Sister Mu must have some good reason for coming here and not for burglary; I shouldn't interfere." She dipped her finger in her mouth and poked a hole in the window panel and peeped in. She was surprised; it was none other than the young prince Wanyan Kang. In his hand was a black object, and when illuminated by the candlelight, Huang Rong saw that it was a head of a rusty spear. [Note: Window in those days were made of oiled paper.]

Huang Rong did not know that this spear was his father Yang Tiexin's property and only felt that it had something to do with Mu Nianci, so she laughed to herself, "The two of you are really acting in concert; don't tell me you're inseparable." She let out an uncontrollable laugh. Wanyan Kang was startled and quickly extinguished the candle, exclaiming, "Who's that?" Huang Rong took this chance to sneak behind Mu Nianci and swiftly sealed her accupoints, rendering her immobile. Huang Rong laughed, "Don't be afraid, I'm just letting you meet your sweetheart."

Wanyan Kang opened the door and was about to run out when he heard a girl giggling, "Your sweetheart is here, catch!" Wanyan Kang exclaimed, "What?" A soft, warm and fragrant body landed in his arms, and the girl who spoke was swiftly over the wall laughing, "Sister, how can you ever thank me?" As the laughing faded, the girl in his arms struggled to get down. Wanyan Kang was shocked beyond

words and immediately stepped backed, asking, "Who's this?" Mu Nianci said softly, "Do you still remember me?" He felt her voice was familiar and stammered, "You... you're Miss Mu?" She replied, "Yes." He asked, "Who came with you?" She said, "It was a mischievous friend; I didn't know she followed me."

He stepped in and relit the candle, saying, "Come in." Mu Nianci bowed her head and entered, sitting on a chair silently but with a thudding heartbeat. Wanyan Kang saw that she was blushing profusely and said soothingly, "Why are you here to find me at this time?" She did not reply. He thought of his parents' deaths and said softly, "Since your father is dead, you can stay with me and I will regard you as my sister."

Mu Nianci replied, "He was my foster father..." Wanyan Kang was surprised and thought, "She's telling me we're not related by blood." He took her hand in his and smiled. Mu Nianci's face reddened even more and her head bowed lower. Wanyan Kang's heart was on fire and he hugged her, whispering into her ear, "This is the third time I've hugged you. The first was during our sparring match, the second was just outside and now there's no one else around."

Mu Nianci said "Mmm" and felt an extremely sweet flush inside, which was happening for the first time in her life. Wanyan Kang smelled her fragrance, felt her slender body and decided that it was so surreal. After a while he asked, "How did you find me?" Mu Nianci said, "I've been following you. Every night I stare at your shadow but I didn't dare..." Wanyan Kang realized that her feelings were deep and was very touched, so he kissed her forehead. In the heat of passion he hugged her tightly and kissed her for a long time.



Mu Nianci whispered, "I'm an orphan... Don't abandon me." Wanyan Kang embraced her and stroked her hair, saying, "Don't worry! You'll always be mine and I'll always be yours, OK?" Mu Nianci felt great joy in her heart and looked into Wanyan Kang's eyes, and nodded. Wanyan Kang saw that she was blushing profusely and did not care anymore; he blew out the candle flame and carried her to the bed and tried to undress her.

Mu Nianci was somewhat intoxicated by his affection, but when he touched her, she hastily pushed him away and said, "No, we can't do this." Wanyan Kang hugged her and said, "I will definitely marry you. If my heart changes I shall die a horrible death." She placed her hand over his mouth and said, "I believe you." He then said, "Then allow me." She pleaded, "No... no..." Wanyan Kang was really aroused and tried to undo her clothes. She struck out with half her maximum force. Wanyan Kang did not expect her to use her martial arts at this moment and he was shoved away. Mu Nianci jumped from the bed, snatched the spearhead and pointed it towards herself, saying, "If you force me I shall die in front of you."

Wanyan Kang's passion immediately turned to ice and he said, "Alright, let's talk about this, don't do that." Mu Nianci said, "Though I'm a poor girl who wanders through Jianghu, I have my dignity and self-respect. If you truly love me, please respect me. I have no other wish in life but to be with you. In future... in future if I marry you I'd of course... obey you. But today if you try to violate me, I'd rather die." Though she said this softly, she never hesitated. He silently admired and respected her, saying, "Don't be angry, it's my fault."

He got off the bed and relit the candle. Mu Nianci heard that he knew his mistake and said, "I'll wait for you at my foster father's home in Ox Village. You can send... the

matchmaker anytime.” She paused and said, “If you never show up, I’ll just wait for my whole life.” Wanyan Kang was really touched and quickly said, “Don’t worry, when my official business is complete, I’ll come immediately. In this life I shall never change my mind.”

Mu Nianci smiled shyly and turned to leave. Wanyan Kang shouted, “Don’t leave...let’s chat for a while more.” Mu Nianci waved and left. Wanyan Kang stood there and stared at her departing shadow and felt like it was but a dream. She did leave a few strands of hair behind from their struggle and those he placed in his pouch. When he first sparred with her, he did not think much about it, but he did not expect her to follow him here and stare at his shadow every night. Yet she strongly cherished her chastity, deeply earning his respect. He smiled and sighed.

# Chapter 13 - The Crippled Person of Five Lake

Translated by SunnySnow



*As the Lake Tai pirates and the Jin officials' boats came closer, there were sounds of yelling, scolding, clashing of weapons and the sounds of splashing as bodies dropped into the water. After a while, the Jin officials' boats were on fire which lit up the dark sky and cast a fiery red glow over the lake.*

When Huang Rong returned to the inn for the night, she thought in her heart how she had done a good deed and was extremely delighted. Following that, she fell into a sweet sleep, and told Guo Jing all about it when she awoke the next morning. Guo Jing had actually spent a lot of effort on this matter. The last time, he got into a messy situation and had to fight for his life with Wanyan Kang and he was also nearly forced to marry Mu Nianci. When he heard that Mu Nianci and Yang Kang were in love, he secretly felt relieved and happy, especially since Qiu Chuji and the Six Freaks of Jiangnan would not be able to force him to marry Mu Nianci anymore. He ate and chatted with Huang Rong and after some time, Mu Nianci still had not come back.

Huang Rong smiled and said, "We don't have to wait for her, let's just go." Following that, she went back into her room and put on a male disguise. Both of them went to the market and bought a donkey and rode to the Jiang residence. When they saw the lantern, which read 'The Jin Ambassador' at the door smashed, they thought that Wanyan Kang must have left and Mu Nianci must have followed him.

Guo Jing and Huang Rong decided to tour the countryside and rowed a boat to the south along the Grand Canal [Dà Yùnhé]. That day they visited the famous Yixing city, which specialized in pottery making and was renowned as the

pottery capital [tao du]. The rows of ceramic creations [zisha pottery] made with purple sand and clay lay amongst the green hills and blue waters which created a beautiful sight. They traveled towards the east and not long after, came upon a huge lake [Lake Tai]. Since the lake was situated between three cities and it took about five hundred li [1li=500m / 1/3mile] to reach the east or south side, the lake was named Five Lake. Guo Jing had never seen such a huge body of water before and pulled Huang Rong to the lakeside. They saw the sky far away from them, a huge, never-ending space in front, with the lake in the middle and couldn't help but yell happily.

Huang Rong said, "Let's go and play on the lake." They found a fishing village near the lake, borrowed a small boat and left the donkey with the owner before rowing out into the waters. After rowing some distance away from the shore, the space between all four corners of the lake seemed so empty and huge that it seemed like heaven to them.

Huang Rong's robes and hair floated gently in the wind and she smiled, "Long ago, Advisor Fan escorted Xi Shi across the Five Lake...what a clever man. His court position is nothing compared to the peaceful life here."

Guo Jing didn't know anything about Advisor Fan's story and asked, "Rong'er, how about you tell me the story."

Huang Rong began to tell of how Fan Li helped the King of Yue avenge the Yue kingdom and how he successfully retreated with Xi Shi to a peaceful life on Lake Tai. She continued on about how Wu Zixu and Wen Zhong were killed by the King of Wu and the King of Yue respectively.

[Historical background: Xi Shi is one of the legendary Four Beauties of China. The others are Wang Zhaojun, Diao Chan

and Yang Guifei (Note that Guifei is a title for the emperor's consort).

\*\* This occurred during the Spring and Autumn period (722-481 BC), before China was united as one empire. At that time, many small states existed. It is against this backdrop that this story took place.]

As the story goes, the King of Yue had once been a prisoner of the King of Wu. He was obsessed about revenge for his humiliation. Fan Li, a minister of the Yue kingdom, came up with a scheme whereby Xi Shi was sent as a gift to the King of Wu. The King of Wu was so enamored by her beauty that he neglected his state, spending all his time with her. Wu Zixu was his best general, but was killed by him.. Eventually, the weakened Wu state was defeated by Yue.

Wen Zhong was a minister of Yue. It was he who ruled Yue while its king was a prisoner. After the defeat of Wu, he was killed by the King of Yue. As for Xi Shi, some legends hold that she disappeared with Fan Li (like what Huang Rong said). Others say she was killed by the King of Yue because he was afraid of succumbing to her beauty like the King of Wu.]

Guo Jing was in a daze after listening to the story and after a while, he recovered and said, "Fan Li was clever, but Wu Zixu and Wen Zhong are admirable too, for dying for their country."

Huang Rong gave a little laugh, "Absolutely. As the saying goes, if a country is virtuous and one does not change, he is the strongest. If a country is corrupted, and one still does not change, he remains the strongest."

Guo Jing asked, "What does this mean?"

Huang Rong replied, "If a country is virtuous, even though one rises to be a powerful official, one would still be as alert

and cautious as before. When the country becomes weak one day and you are still willing to die for your country, then you are the real hero."

Guo Jing nodded his head and said, "Rong'er, how clever of you to think of this!"

Huang Rong laughed, "Ai ya! If I could think of this, I would be a sage. These are Confucius sayings which my father taught me when I was young."

Guo Jing sighed, "There are so many matters I can never understand. If I had read more books and learned more sayings, I would have understood more."

Huang Rong said, "That may not always be the case. My father always tells me that a lot of sayings by sages and scholars are nothing but rubbish. I often see my father reading and saying out loud 'No, No what nonsense, this is atrocious!' Sometimes, he would also say 'What sage! It's a pack of rubbish!'" Guo Jing laughed out loud hearing how Huang Rong described her father.

Huang Rong continued, "I somehow regret spending so much time studying and practicing art and calligraphy. If I hadn't pestered my father to teach me such stuff as well as all sorts of other things such as the interesting ways of calculations, I would have devoted more time to practicing my martial skills and we wouldn't have to be afraid of people like Mei Chaofeng and the old Liang creature! But don't worry Jing ge ge, you've learned Qigong's 'Eighteen, but short three, Dragon-Subduing Palms' and thus you don't have to fear that old Liang creature anymore."

Guo Jing shook his head and said, "I don't think that's possible."

Huang Rong laughed and said, "It's a pity Qigong left. If he hadn't, I would have confiscated and hidden his dog beating stick and forced him to teach you the remaining three stances before returning it to him."

Guo Jing hurriedly said, "No, no. I'm more than satisfied to be able to learn the fifteen stances. How can we make trouble for Senior Qigong?"

Both started chatting and stopped rowing, allowing the wind to move the boat freely. Without realizing it, they were already miles away from the shore. They saw a fisherman fishing lazily from a boat not far away and there was a servant at the bow of the boat.

Huang Rong pointed and said, "As the mist clears, one can see the shape of a straight bamboo rod. It's just like a painting of water inked scenery."

Guo Jing asked, "What's water inked scenery?"

Huang Rong answered, "That's paintings which use only black ink and no other colors."

Guo Jing saw the green hills, blue waters, white clouds and orange sun but could not find anything black in color. He shook his head, not understanding Huang Rong's words. Huang Rong chatted more with Guo Jing. Later she turned around and saw that the fisherman was still sitting straight in the boat and his rod had not moved an inch. Huang Rong laughed, "This person does have a lot of patience."

A gust of wind blew over them and little waves of water sloshed gently against the boat. Huang Rong swung her arms about and started singing a song entitled 'The Water Dragon's Hum' which tells about life on the lake. She finished singing the first part of the song before resting a little. Guo Jing noticed tears in her eyes and was just about



to ask her the meaning of the song when suddenly, they heard a melancholy voice singing the exact same song Huang Rong was singing earlier, except that it was the second part. When they looked around, it seemed as though the fisherman was the one singing the song. His voice sounded somewhat forceful yet gentle. Guo Jing did not understand what both of them were singing about but thought that it sounded very nice. However, when Huang Rong heard the song, she looked stunned.

Guo Jing asked, "What's the matter?"

Huang Rong answered, "My father often sings this song, I didn't expect a common fisherman to know it too. Let's check it out." Both of them rowed the boat over only to see the fisherman holding his fishing rod and rowing his boat forward. When both boats neared each other, the fisherman asked, "To think I was fortunate enough to meet such special guests, can I invite you in for a drink?"

Huang Rong thought his speech sounded composed and refined. She was secretly curious, and answered, "We do not wish to bother the senior."

The fisherman laughed, "It's not easy to meet such special guests, but since we meet by chance on the lake, we should treasure it. Please come over."

The two boats moved even closer. Huang Rong and Guo Jing rowed the boat along side the other boat and climbed in to greet the fisherman. The fisherman greeted them while staying seated and said, "Please be seated. I am crippled so can't stand up, I apologize for any inconvenience."

Guo Jing and Huang Rong said, "It's alright."

Both of them sat down and observed the fisherman. He looked about forty years of age, had a rather thin face and

looked as if he were ill. He was very tall and even though seated, he was still half a head taller than Guo Jing. The servant at the back of the boat began warming up some wine.

Huang Rong said, "My older brother's surname is Guo, whereas junior is surnamed Huang. I was excited for a moment and started singing in the middle of the lake. I haven't offended the senior have I?"

The fisherman laughed, "I am fortunate to be able to listen to such a clear voice. My surname is Lu. Little brother, is it your first time touring this lake?"

Guo Jing answered, "Yes."

The fisherman ordered the servant to bring out some dishes and wine for the guests. Although the four dishes were nothing compared to Huang Rong's cooking, they tasted good too and the wine cups and dish plates looked quite unique, and no doubt belonged to some precious collection.

The three of them started drinking. The fisherman said, "Just now I heard little brother singing the song 'The Water Dragon's Hum' which has such perfect lyrics. It is such a surprise that little brother, though so young in age, is still able to comprehend the deep meanings of the words."

When Huang Rong heard his admiring words, she gave a little smile and said, "Ever since the Song moved south, song writers often write sad songs for the country."

The fisherman nodded in agreement. Huang Rong continued, "The song 'The Six Cities' by Zhang Yuhu has the same meaning."

The fisherman started singing the lyrics, "When people pass by, one would cry tears of loyalty and anger..." He drank up

three cups of wine and engaged in conversation with Huang Rong. Actually Huang Rong is just a young girl and had not experienced any real sorrows caused by 'one's country'. She did not really identify with the deep meaning of the lyrics. It was just that she'd listened to her father explain the meanings before and thus used her father's explanation which was a very refined and sophisticated one. This awed the fisherman, who could not help but praise Huang Rong. Guo Jing listened from one corner and did not understand a single word, but he was delighted hearing the fisherman praise Huang Rong. After chatting awhile, he saw that the landscape had paled and the mist surrounding the lake had thickened.

The fisherman said, "My residence is close by the lake, if you don't mind, I would like to invite both of you there for more discussions."

Huang Rong asked, "How about it, Jing ge ge?"

Guo Jing hadn't had a chance to answer before the fisherman said, "My house is built against the backdrop of beautiful hills. Since both of you are touring the countryside, why not stop by for a visit?"

Guo Jing felt that he seemed honest and earnest and thus answered, "Rong'er, we'll have to impose on Mr. Lu." The fisherman was delighted and implored the servant to row the boat back home.

When they reached the lakeshore, Guo Jing said, "We will have to return the boat first and collect the donkey and my horse."

The fisherman smiled and said, "I'm acquainted with everyone in the area. You can let him handle the matter." With that, he gestured to the servant.

Guo Jing said, "My horse is bad tempered; I'd better handle it."

The fisherman said, "If you insist; I'll wait for your arrival at my residence then." With that, the boat rowed off and disappeared into the distance.

The servant followed Guo Jing and Huang Rong to get the things done. He got a larger boat from one of the villagers, which had enough space to hold the donkey and horse. Six hardy boatmen rowed the boat for some distance before the front of an island came into view. They stopped the boat at the jetty, which was made of green stone. When they arrived on shore, they saw a cluster of small houses, which formed a huge manor. They crossed a large stone bridge and arrived in front of the manor. Guo Jing and Huang Rong looked at each other, since they didn't expect a fisherman to live in such a luxurious place. Before they could reach the main entrance, they saw a man who looked about twenty years of age coming up to them. About six servants followed behind him. The youth said, "My father sent me to receive his guests."

Guo Jing and Huang Rong made grateful gestures. They noticed that he wore a long robe and had similar facial features to the fisherman, except that he looked stronger and well built. Guo Jing said, "May we know brother Lu's name?"

The youth said, "This humble one is named Guanying; please just call me by my name."

Huang Rong answered politely, "No, how can we?"

The three began chatting while proceeding towards the main hall. Guo Jing and Huang Rong noticed that the interior of the hall was designed and decorated beautifully.

As Huang Rong walked, she concentrated on the layout of the place and its pathways. She looked a little puzzled.

As the three of them crossed the front yard and entered the guest hall, they heard the fisherman call out from behind a screen, "Please come in."

Lu Guanying said, "My father is unable to walk and thus has to receive you in his east study."

The three of them went past the screen and saw that the door of the study was open; the fisherman was sitting on a couch, inside. However, he was no longer dressed as a fisherman but as an elderly scholar. He held a white goose feather fan in his hand and was fanning himself cheerfully. Guo Jing and Huang Rong entered and sat, but Lu Guanying didn't dare sit and stood to one side. Huang Rong saw that the study was filled with shelves of literary classics and poetry collections. The tables were decorated with precious ornaments, such as jade antiques and a black ink painting hung on the wall. The painting depicted a middle-aged scholar who was posing with a sword stance in the backyard in the moonlight. But the scholar had a lonely expression on his face. On the upper left corner of the painting was a poem.

"The night is silent without any chirping from the birds. It is already late in the night when I fall into deep sleep. I awake only to carry on alone, there is no one but the bright moon there. A hundred pieces gain recognition and success. The aging hills and withering branches block my path.

There are so many things buried within me but no one is willing to listen, to whom can I confide in my problems?"

Huang Rong recognized this poem as one written by Yue Fei entitled 'Little Strong Hill'. It had been taught to her by her father. She saw the signature at the bottom which read

'The Crippled Person of Five Lake is seriously ill' and realized that the 'Crippled Person of Five Lake' must be the pen name for the owner of this manor. The strokes of the words were written in a harsh and forceful manner and seemed like they were tearing through the paper.

Master Lu saw that Huang Rong was concentrating on the painting and asked, "Brother, how do you find my painting? Would you care to give me some pointers?" [Reminder: Huang Rong is dressed as a boy.]

Huang Rong answered, "I will express my thoughts then, but I hope Master Lu does not get offended."

Master Lu said, "Please go on."

Huang Rong said, "The poem in the painting is Yue Fei's 'Little Strong Hill', which he wrote in his Wu Mu collections. The words depict a distressed and depressed mood. However there are specific meanings to them. General Yue was a courageous soul and fought hard for his country and people. The phrase, 'A hundred pieces for recognition and success' in the poem is probably to show his humble being. At that time, many court officials were corrupt and were on the side of the Jin. Yue Fei was a strong official but it was a pity no one was willing to listen to him. This was probably why he wrote the phrase, 'There are so many things buried within me but no one is willing to listen, to whom can I confide my problems?' The phrase depicts a despondent Yue Fei, but it doesn't necessarily mean that he wanted to oppose the court. However when master wrote this poem, you were in an agitated and aggressive mood and thus asserted much force in your brush strokes; it seems as if you wanted to fight it out with your sworn enemy and thus, your intentions and mood do not tie in at all with Yue Fei's at the time when he worked on his Wu Mu collections. Forgive me for my ignorance but from what I know, if one

strives to over achieve or over express in literary and art works, the true and pure intentions will be lost and the work will be unable to achieve its brilliance.”

When Master Lu heard what Huang Rong said, he gave a long sigh. He wore a miserable expression and was silent. Huang Rong saw his unusual response and thought, “I’m afraid I have been too direct in my words and offended him. But it’s exactly what father taught me when he explained this poem.”

She said, “This humble one has been too ignorant and spouted nonsense. Please forgive me Master Lu.”

Master Lu recovered a little and then wore a delighted expression on his face. He asked happily, “Brother Huang, please don’t say that. You are the first person who can actually read my feelings, what a great confidant you are. As for the over use of expression, it is one of my worst habits. I thank brother for your pointers.” He turned to his son and said, “Hurry and ask the servants to prepare the banquet.”

Guo Jing and Huang Rong hurriedly conveyed their thanks and said, “Please don’t bother.” But Lu Guanying had already disappeared from the room.

Master Lu said, “Brother is wise and knowledgeable, you must have mastered a high level of literary classics and your father must be a brilliant teacher. I wonder what his honorable name is?”

Huang Rong answered, “This humble one knows nothing much and thus does not deserve all this praise. My father lives in isolation and does not have any students; thus his name is not well known.”

Master Lu sighed, "What a pity it is, not being able to meet such talent."

After the banquet, they returned to the study for a chat. Master Lu said, "The scenery outside is some of the best, why don't the two of you reside in one of the houses in the manor and enjoy the view? Furthermore, it's getting late and it is time for you to rest."

Guo Jing and Huang Rong stood up and bid their farewell. Huang Rong was about to leave the room when she suddenly looked up and saw that eight pieces of iron strips were fixed above the study's lintel. The iron strips were arranged to form the 'Eight trigrams', but it was not as neat as the usual arrangement. The iron strips were arranged in a rather sloppy and messy way. Huang Rong's heart skipped a beat but she remained silent and expressionless and followed Guo Jing to a guest room. The guest room was decorated in an elegant way; the two beds faced each other and the pillows and sheets were clean.

A servant served them some fragrant tea and said, "If sirs need anything, just ring the bell beside the bed and I will come. Please be reminded never to leave the room." With that, he left the room and gently closed the door behind him.

Huang Rong asked in a low voice, "What do you find peculiar about this place? Why do they ask us not to leave the room?"

Guo Jing said, "The manor is huge and the pathways lead out in all directions. Maybe they're afraid that we will get lost?"

Huang Rong gave a little laugh, "The manor has an unusual design. What kind of person do you think Master Lu is?"



Guo Jing said, "Maybe a retired official?"

Huang Rong shook her head, "This person is no doubt highly skilled in martial arts. Did you see the iron 'Eight Trigrams' just now?"

Guo Jing asked, "Iron 'Eight Trigrams'? What's that?"

Huang Rong answered, "That's used to practice the 'Thrusting Air Palms'. Father taught me this set of palm techniques but I was bored and stopped learning it after a month. I would never have expected to see it here."

Guo Jing said, "Master Lu means us no harm. Since he did not mention anything about it, let's just pretend that we are unaware of it."

Huang Rong nodded and smiled. She gently thrust out her palm towards the candle and a 'chi' sound was heard just before the candle went out.

Guo Jing praised in a low voice, "Great palm technique!" He asked, "Is that the 'Thrusting Air Palm'?"

Huang Rong smiled, "I only learned it to this level. It can be used for fun but it is totally useless when used in a real duel."

There was a sudden distant humming in the middle of the night, which startled Guo Jing and Huang Rong, who had been sleeping before that. They strained to hear more and heard the sound again, which sounded like someone was blowing a tune on a seashell. After a while, the humming started again. There was definitely more than one person creating the noise as both hums were created at the same time. It seemed like there were two people standing apart and blowing the shells to communicate. Huang Rong whispered, "Let's go and see what's up."

Guo Jing answered, "Let's not go and find trouble."

Huang Rong argued, "Who says we're finding trouble? I only suggested that we check out what's happening."

They pushed open the window quietly and looked out. They saw many people running about with lanterns in their hands, but there was no clue as to why they were rushing about. Huang Rong looked up and saw three or four blurred figures crouching on a nearby rooftop. The light from the lanterns shone briefly onto the figures and Huang Rong saw the moving light reflecting from the weapons which those people carried. After a while, the crowd of servants ran out of the manor. Huang Rong was curious and pulled Guo Jing towards the side of the window. She made sure no one was about and gently leaped out such that the people on the roof weren't aware of her movements.

Huang Rong signaled to Guo Jing to walk backwards. The pathways in the manor turned and twisted such that the directions were very complicated. The most unusual thing was that the railings and pillars at every turn looked exactly the same. After a few whirls, one would not be able to distinguish between the different directions. Huang Rong, however, was not the least bothered about this obstacle and walked around without any hint of worry or suspicion. Several times, it looked as if it was no pathway but she always managed to identify a fake rock and spin past it; or she would just twirl round the flowers and they would be back on the main path. At times, it looked as if there was a dead end in front of them, but somehow or other, there would always be a way past a screen of a huge trees. At times, there would be a path through the opening of a grotto but Huang Rong would never walk through. Instead, she would miraculously be able to identify a hidden and unnoticeable entrance in the walls and push through. The more Guo Jing proceeded the more curious he became. He

whispered, "Rong'er, the pathways of this manor are really bizarre, how is it that you are always able to identify the right way?"

Huang Rong signaled for him to be quiet and after seven or eight more turns, they arrived by the wall of the backyard. Huang Rong examined the wall and used her fingers to count before walking and counting her footsteps. Guo Jing heard her mumble, "Form a trigram first, thirdly prepare, fifthly supplement, repeat the seventh..."and he did not understand a single word.

Huang Rong counted as she walked, and after a particular count, she stopped in her tracks and said, "We can only leave from here; the rest of the place is filled with traps."

She leapt onto the top of the wall and Guo Jing followed suit. Huang Rong continued, "This manor is built according to sixty-four bearings (positions) which are concealed. My father is a master in this particular type of pattern, which requires one to design eight different types of routes. Master Lu can obstruct others, but he can't trap me." Her tone was filled with pride.

The two climbed up a small mound situated behind the manor and looked out towards the east. They saw a person walking towards the lake with a lantern raised high. Huang Rong tugged at Guo Jing's sleeve and both of them flew forward using their lightness skill. Arriving closer, they hid behind a huge rock and noticed a row of fishing boats near the shore of the lake. A crowd of people slowly boarded the boats and after they did so, each put out their lanterns. Guo Jing and Huang Rong waited till the last batch of people boarded and it was pitch dark before leaping out and landing on the tail of a large boat. After they heard the fishing boats begin to move, they leaped on top of the sail of the boat and looked down. It was then they saw someone

sitting inside the cabin of the boat and the person was none other than the junior of the manor, Lu Guanying.

As the row of boats started moving, the tune from the seashell could be heard again. A person on the boat walked to the front and also started blowing into a shell. After the boat moved some distance, one could see many little boats drifting on the lake. The myriad of little boats looked like tiny ants in the distance as though one had painted hundreds of black dots on a large sheet of paper. The person on the boat blew his shell three times and the large boat dropped its small boat into the middle of the lake. About ten little boats started moving in from all directions. Guo Jing and Huang Rong were mystified and they were not sure whether or not a battle was going to take place. They lowered their heads and peeped at Lu Guanying, who looked calm and normal; he did not show any hint of anxiousness as one would show in times of war.

Not long after, the boats sailed nearer. Every boat had either two or three people who boarded the boat. Every person, after boarding the huge boat, would bow to Lu Guanying and were respectful in their behavior. It seemed that seats had been arranged for the visitors from the little boats according to their status. Some people had arrived earlier but sat at the back, whereas some who arrived later got to sit in the front. A tea server ushered the visitors to their seats. The visitors had stern and rough expressions and their actions were swift and fierce. Although they dressed like fishermen, it seemed as if all of them were well versed in martial arts and were definitely not the usual type of fisherman.

Lu Guanying raised his arm and said, "Brother Zhang, what have you found out?" A skinny man sitting in the middle stood up and said, "To answer Junior Master, the Jin Ambassador has decided to sail across the lake tonight.

Commander Duan should arrive in about one shichens. [one shichen = 2 hours] He is using the pretext of greeting the ambassador to engage in some plunder along the way. That is why he is late. ”

Lu Guanying asked, “How much has he ransacked?”

The man answered, “There have been harvests from every village and his soldiers are still robbing the villagers now. When I saw him board the boat, his soldiers were struggling with more than twenty heavy chests of treasure.”

Lu Guanying asked, “How many soldiers and horses does he have with him?”

The man answered, “About two thousand. Those who cross the lake do not have horses with them. Since there are not enough boats, there are about a thousand of them who stayed back on shore.”

Lu Guanying turned towards the audience and asked, “Bothers, what do you think?”

Everyone answered, “We will follow Junior Master’s orders.”

Lu Guanying placed both hands into his sleeves and said, “These corrupt officials go around confiscating money through immoral means. We, the people of the lake, would not be delivering justice if we do not get that money back. We will do our best to take as much as we can. Half of it will go to the poor villagers by the lake and the other half will be split between us.”

The audience all roared in agreement. It was then that Guo Jing and Huang Rong realize that these people were the pirates of the lake and Lu Guanying was probably their leader.

Lu Guanying said, "Without further delay, let's get going. Brother Zhang, take five small boats and continue to keep watch."

The skinny man took the order and immediately sailed away. Lu Guanying went on to assign everyone their tasks, such as who would lead, who would be the back ups, who would lead the 'water ghosts' to swim and create damage to the enemy's boat, who would grab the treasure, who would capture the official and so on. He carefully assigned the various tasks in a very organized way.

Guo Jing and Huang Rong were puzzled. They had just dined and chatted with Lu Guanying earlier in the day and found him to be a polite, proper and decent chap, not forgetting that he was from a wealthy and cultivated family. Who would have guessed that he was a pirate leader? Just as Lu Guanying finished assigning the various tasks and everyone was setting out, someone from the middle of the group stood up and said coldly, "We people have no assets and it is alright to rob some wealthy businessmen. But if we attack such an official, won't we have trouble living on the lake in the future? We should not offend the Jin Ambassador."

Guo Jing and Huang Rong thought the voice sounded familiar. When they squinted to have a better look, they realized that it was Sha Tongtian's disciple, one of the 'Four Demons of the Yellow River', 'Spirit Capturing Whip' Ma Qingxiong; they had no idea how he ended up in this group. Lu Guanying's expression changed; he had yet to answer when a few pirates in the crowd starting hooting.

Lu Guanying said, "Brother Ma is a first timer and doesn't know the rules here. Since everyone is determined to carry out the task, we'll give our all and make sure the soldiers

have no chance to retaliate, only then can we die without regrets.”

Ma Qingxiong answered, “Alright, you people go ahead; I would rather not get involved and get myself into trouble.” With that, he turned and started to walk off the boat. Two men blocked him and called out, “Brother Ma, you swore that you will go through thick and thin with us!”

Ma Qingxiong pushed out with both palms and retorted, “Move away!” The two men were hit and fell to the side. As Ma Qingxiong was about to leave the boat he suddenly felt a gust of wind fly towards his back, when the wind passed him he used his left hand to take a dagger from his boot, twist his arm and thrust the dagger behind him. Lu Guanying stretched out his left arm and positioned it on the entrance door; at the same time, he leaped and thrust his palm forward. Ma Qingxiong used his right arm to block the attack while using his left arm to thrust the dagger forward. The two men exchanged attacks in the narrow passage-way of the boat. Guo Jing once fought with Ma Qingxiong back in Mongolia. When he first saw Lu Guanying’s moves, he thought that it would not be easy for him to win. But after more moves, Lu Guanying gained the upper hand and was clearly going to win. Guo Jing was suspicious and thought, “Why is Ma suddenly not strong anymore? Ah, yes, that day when he fought with me he had the support of his martial brothers; but now, he’s alone surrounded by many enemies, of course he’ll be afraid.” But Guo Jing did not know that the real reason lay in Hong Qigong’s training of the past two months. Guo Jing had mastered fifteen stances of the world renowned ‘Eighteen Dragon- Subduing Palms’, accompanied by pointers and advice provided by Hong Qigong himself. Because of this, although he did not understand the full essence of the skill, his martial arts had improved tremendously and were at a very much higher

level than the skills he learned from the 'Seven Freaks of Jiangnan'. At this point in time, Guo Jing was still unaware that his skills had already exceeded his six teachers, and thus, he still thought that he was inferior to Ma Qingxiong. He saw the two men exchange further stances when Lu Guanying shot out his left fist and a 'pa' sound was heard; the blow hit Ma Qingxiong on the chest and he stumbled and fell back. Two pirates behind him pierced him with their daggers and Ma Qingxiong lay dead. The two pirates then lifted the corpse and threw it into the lake.

Lu Guanying continued, "Brothers, let's embrace our mission bravely." The crowd began to cheer loudly and each group separated, went back to their respective boats and began to head east. Lu Guanying's huge boat sailed at the rear of the others. After awhile, they spotted around ten huge and brightly lit boats from afar, heading west towards them.

Guo Jing and Huang Rong thought to themselves, "Those big boats must belong to the officials."

The two quietly climbed up the mast of the boat and sat on top at a cross arm hiding themselves behind the sail. They heard the seashell tunes from the little boats as the opposing sides got closer. There were sounds of yelling, scolding, clashing weapons and the sounds of splashing as bodies dropped into the water. After awhile, the officials' boats were on fire which lit up the dark sky and cast a fiery red glow over the lake. Guo Jing and Huang Rong knew that the pirates had succeeded in their mission and saw a few little boats sailing forward furiously with shouts of, "The soldiers have been defeated and the commander has been captured."

Lu Guanying was delighted as he walked to the bow of the boat and shouted, "Inform the various chiefs on each boat



to put in a little more effort so that we can capture the Jin Ambassador!" The pirate who delivered the news obeyed and flew off to pass on the message.

Guo Jing and Huang Rong nudged each other at the same time and had the same thought, "That Jin Ambassador must be Wanyan Kang; I wonder how he will deal with this."

They heard the seashell tune coming from various boats again and saw that the group of boats had turned back in their direction and the pirates were tugging at their sails. The west wind suddenly blew furiously, causing the boats to sail like arrows shooting towards the east. Lu Guanying's boat had been at the rear of the fleet, but now his boat had become the lead. Guo Jing and Huang Rong were now sitting on the cabin's roof with the wind blowing on their backs. They were sailing fast across the misty lake and the myriads of stars in the sky came into view and they had the urge to sing out loud. Suddenly, the little boats sailed past one by one and ended up in front of the boat Guo Jing and Huang Rong were on.

The boats sailed for about an hour and the sky turned brighter before two boats sailed quickly towards the boat. One of the men in the boat raised a green flag and waved it, shouting, "We have spotted the Jin boat! The commander's boat has already taken the lead to capture it."

Lu Guanying, standing in the bow of his boat, called out, "Good!"

After a short while, another small boat sailed back and reported, "That bastard Jin Ambassador has deadly claws; our commander is injured but leader Peng and Dong are currently trying to subdue him."

In a while, two pirates carried the injured and unconscious commander onto Lu Guanying's boat. As Lu Guanying was

inspecting the wounds, two small boats rowed up and the pirates helped their two injured leaders up onto the boat. The pirates also reported that Piao Miao Peak's Leader Guo suffered a deadly blow from the Jin Ambassador and fell into the lake. Lu Guanying was furious and shouted, "I am going to personally kill that vicious Jin dog."

Guo Jing and Huang Rong were strongly against Wanyan Kang's actions but could not bear to let him fend off the group of pirates alone. This would make Mu Nianci hate them forever. Huang Rong whispered into Guo Jing's ear, "Are we going to help him?"

Guo Jing replied with a slight sigh, "Save him but make him repent." Huang Rong nodded.

At the same time, Lu Guanying leaped onto a small boat and yelled, "Let's go!"

Huang Rong said to Guo Jing, "Let's go and stop the small boat." Both of them leaped onto the side of the small boat and heard some shouting from the group of pirates in front. They looked out and saw the Jin Ambassador's boats slowly sinking one by one. They thought that it must have been the doings of the 'Water Ghosts' who were in charge of wrecking the bottom of the boats from below.

As the pirates waved the green flag, two small boats hurriedly rowed over and reported, "The Jin dog fell into the water and has been captured by us!"

Lu Guanying was delighted and leaped back onto his boat. After awhile, the seashell tune was blown again and the various little boats assembled, one by one bringing along with them the Jin Ambassador and his guards onto the boat. Guo Jing and Huang Rong saw that Wanyan Kang had his hands and feet bound with ropes and his eyes were tightly shut. They thought that he must have swallowed too much

water but his chest had not congested and he was still breathing. By this time, the sky was already light as sunlight shone brightly from the east revealing a line of boats floating gracefully on the lake.

Lu Guanying commanded, "The various leaders may return to the manor and hold a banquet to celebrate. Please lead your teams and await your rewards."

The pirates cheered loudly and the boats parted ways and slowly disappeared into the cloud of mist. The lake became peaceful and quiet once more. Guo Jing and Huang Rong waited for the boat to sail back to the Lu Manor and after Lu Guanying and his group of pirates left, they flew back to the shore. The pirates were overjoyed with their rewards and did not notice that there had been people secretly hiding on their boat. Huang Rong sought out the directions and led Guo Jing into the manor via the backyard and back into their room.

By this time, the servant who took care of them had checked a few times to see if they had awakened, but since the room door was still locked, he thought that the two young men must have had a long day yesterday and thus slept longer. After they got back into their room, Guo Jing opened the door and two servants who waited outside came forward to greet him before bringing some breakfast. One said, "Master Lu is waiting in his study. Please go and join him after your breakfast." The two ate some dishes and buns before following the servant to the study.

Master Lu smiled and said, "The winds from the lake are strong and when they blow against the shore, the noise might be disturbing. Did you two sleep well?"

Guo Jing wasn't used to lying so when he heard the question, he froze for a moment. Huang Rong answered,

"We only heard sounds of seashells blowing during the night, I think it must have been the monks and Taoist priests chanting and practicing their rituals."

Master Lu laughed and did not ask more. Instead, he said, "I have collected some artistic works and would like you two brothers to have a look."

Huang Rong answered, "Of course. Anything that Master Lu collects must be priceless."

Master Lu ordered the keeper of the study to bring out some artistic pieces and Huang Rong observed each of the pieces curiously. Suddenly, noises came from outside. They could hear footsteps and it sounded like a group of people chasing someone. A voice said, "Once you've stepped into the manor grounds, it will be impossible for you to escape!"

Master Lu acted as if nothing had happened and as if he hadn't heard anything. He asked, "The art of calligraphy in our dynasty is dominated by the four families, Su, Huang, Mi and Cai. I wonder which family brother Huang likes best?"

Huang Rong was about to answer when the door of the study suddenly burst open and a person, who was wet from head to toe, rushed in. It was Wanyan Kang. Huang Rong tugged on Guo Jing's sleeve and whispered, "Look at the pieces of art, don't look at him." The two turned around and lowered their heads to the calligraphy works.

Wanyan Kang didn't know how to swim; when his boat sank earlier, though he was well versed in martial arts, he could not save himself. He passed out and when he regained consciousness he had been captured and brought to the manor for questioning by Lu Guanying. Wanyan Kang noticed that the pirate guarding him did not carry his usual dagger and came up with a plan. He summoned his internal

strength and used his fingers to grab onto the ropes which bound him and used the 'Nine Yin White Bone Claw' to free himself. The guards were stunned and rushed forward to re-capture him but were attacked by his claws and fell to the ground. Wanyan Kang ran off but couldn't have guessed that the manor was structured with bizarre mazes. If a stranger did not know the secret to the formations and did not have a guide from the manor, he or she would get trapped on the manor grounds. Wanyan Kang, anxious when he could not find his way out, barged into Master Lu's study. Although Lu Guanying knew that he had freed himself from the ropes, he also knew that Wanyan Kang would not be able to find his way out of the manor grounds and was not worried. He chased after Wanyan Kang and saw him dash into Master Lu's study. Afraid that his father would get hurt, he dashed forward and stood in front of his father. The section leaders of Lake Tai blocked the doorway.

Wanyan Kang was furious at being trapped; he pointed a finger at Lu Guanying and yelled, "Despicable pirates! You people used dirty tricks to sink my boat. Have you no sense of shame; aren't you afraid you'll be mocked by the other Jianghu swordsmen?"

Lu Guanying laughed heartily and said, "You are a Jin Prince, what business do you have with us Han swordsmen? What have the people of Jianghu got to do with you?"

Wanyan Kang answered, "When I was in Yanjing, I heard of many stories regarding the heroes of Jiangnan and thought that the men of Jiangnan were all upright and courageous. Hah! Who would have thought that you people...hai, you people do not live up to your reputations at all!"

Lu Guanying was furious and shouted, "So?"

Wanyan Kang answered, "You people are no more than despicable cowards who use vast strength to defeat one person!"

Lu Guanying laughed coldly, "So if anyone takes you on alone and wins, then you will die without regrets?"

Wanyan Kang was using words to infuriate Lu Guanying and trick him into saying exactly this. He immediately replied, "If the manor has just one person who can exceed me in terms of fighting, I would willingly give in and will die without regrets. But I wonder who would I spar with?" As he said this, he arrogantly looked around the crowd with hands behind him laughing coldly.

These words angered Lake Tai's Mo Li Peak's chief, the section leader, 'Golden Rock' who shouted, "Bastard, I am going to beat you!" With that, he rushed into the study, stretched out both fists and using the stance 'Sounds of the Striking Bells' aimed towards Wanyan Kang's Taiyang accupoint. Wanyan Kang gently shifted his body and flipped his left palm to grab hold of the back of his opponent's robe before swinging him out of the door.

Lu Guanying, having seen Wanyan Kang's vicious strokes, was secretly alarmed. He knew that none of the section heads were his match and yelled, "Excellent skills, let me exchange a few stances with you. Let's go out into the yard." Lu Guanying knew that his opponent was strong and was afraid that if they fought in the study, one of them would accidentally harm his father and his guests, since none of them knew how to fight.

Wanyan Kang answered, "It's the same wherever we fight, why not just stay here? Please display your stance section leader!" Actually, his words were hinting at another meaning. What Wanyan Kang was actually thinking in his

heart was, "I only have to use a few stances to defeat you, why bother changing the place of the fight?"

Lu Guanying, seething, said, "Alright, since you are the guest, please start first."

Wanyan Kang relaxed his right palm and used his left palm to attack Lu Guanying's chest. His first stance already used the 'Nine Yin White Bone Claw', and was intended to injure his opponent immediately.

Lu Guanying mentally scolded, "Arrogant fellow, let me show you what I am capable of." He sucked in his chest subtly but did not retreat. Instead, he used his right fist to attack his opponent's moving elbow, while two of his left fingers pointed towards Wanyan Kang's face, with the intention of piercing his eyes. Wanyan Kang saw that his stances were swift and was a little nervous. He secretly thought to himself, "Who would have thought there would be such a skilled fighter in this out of the way place?" With that, he hurriedly retreated half a step, flipped his wrist and aimed at Lu's arms. Lu Guanying twisted to his left and put both hands together in the form of a pouch with the thumb and index finger of one hand facing those of his other hand. The move was none other than 'Holding the Moon Against One's Chest'. Wanyan Kang knew that his opponent was strong and did not dare underestimate him any longer. He became serious and displayed the Quanzhen fist techniques which Qiu Chuji had taught him. Lu Guanying was the favorite pupil of Honorable Kumo of the Yun Qi monastery. He learned the fist techniques of the Xian Xia School, which was affiliated with the Shaolin monastery in the hills of Henan. Therefore, the skills Lu Guanying learned were orthodox; he was cautious of his opponent and used different skills to counter whatever his opponent used. He knew that Wanyan Kang's claw techniques were superior and thus made sure that he didn't let Wanyan Kang's

fingers touch his body. When he saw the chance to attack Wanyan Kang, he used his legs. His teacher had taught him, "Use your fists thirty percent and your legs seventy percent. Your hands are just like fans; concentrate on using your kicks."

Lu Guanying learned skills that did not belong to his family and his kicking techniques were excellent. The longer the two fought, the faster their stances became and they looked like two dancing shadows sparring with each other in the study. Guo Jing and Huang Rong did not want Wanyan Kang to recognize them and retreated to the side of a bookshelf and secretly observed the fight. Wanyan Kang was getting agitated the longer he fought and secretly thought to himself, "If this goes on, even if I can defeat him this round, there will still be others wanting to spar with me. By that time, how will I have any energy left for fighting?"

His skills were actually much superior to Lu Guanying's; but because he had nearly drowned and swallowed so much water he'd lost quite a bit of energy and his body was exhausted. Furthermore, it was the first time he'd been trapped in this sort of situation and was somewhat nervous and therefore allowed Lu Guanying to gain the upper hand for more than ten stances. He forced himself to concentrate and put more force into his attacks. A cracking sound was heard as Lu Guanying's shoulder was injured by Wanyan Kang's fist. Lu Guanying stumbled and retreated backwards. He saw that his opponent was using this chance to attack further and leaped up, kicking his right leg forward towards Wanyan Kang's chest. The stance, called 'Bosom Kick' is a very swift and powerful one which Lu Guanying had practiced since young. He had tied himself to a rope so as to develop his speed since the stance emphasizes the swiftness of the kick such that the opponent is caught by surprise and cannot defend himself in time.



Wanyan Kang felt a pain in his chest and he twirled his right hand jabbing his fingers into Lu Guanying's calf. He used his left palm and thrust towards Lu Guanying's calf while yelling, "Down!"

Lu Guanying was actually standing on one foot but after that strong push by Wanyan Kang, he lost his balance and fell backwards towards his father. Master Lu stretched out his left arm and caught Lu Guanying before gently placing him on the floor. When he saw the blood that flowed from his son's leg he was shocked and furious. Master Lu shouted, "How are you connected to the 'Twin Killers of the Dark Winds'?"

Everyone was surprised when Master Lu intervened. Wanyan Kang and the various section leaders were unaware that Master Lu knew martial arts; even his son, Lu Guanying did not know it. Everyone thought that because Master Lu was crippled, it was natural that he would not know martial arts and could not fight. Even since he was young, Lu Guanying never asked about or probed into his father's affairs. Who would have expected that that move which Master Lu displayed to save his son would be steady and strong? Huang Rong had seen the iron 'Eight Trigrams' on the study's lintel last night and had pointed it out to Guo Jing. They were the only ones who did not seem that surprised.

When Wanyan Kang heard Master Lu ask about the 'Twin Killers of the Dark Winds', he froze for a moment before answering. "What are the 'Twin Killers of the Dark Winds'?" Although Mei Chaofeng had taught him martial arts, she never told him about her past and Wanyan Kang did not even know her name. It was therefore understandable that he did not know anything about the 'Twin Killers of the Dark Winds'.

Master Lu was furious and shouted, "Who are you bluffing? Who taught you the deadly 'Nine Yin White Bone Claws'?"

Wanyan Kang replied, "I have no time to listen to more of your nonsense, good bye!" With that, he turned and headed towards the door.

The various section leaders were furious and took up their weapons, ready to guard the doorway. Wanyan Kang turned towards Lu Guanying and laughed coldly, "Didn't you give your word just now?"

Lu Guanying was pale and waved his arm saying, "Heroes of the lake keep to their promises; brothers, let him go. Brother Zhang, please lead him out."

The section leaders were all unwilling to do so but since the Junior Master had given orders, they could not oppose him. Leader Zhang said, "Follow me then. I bet a rascal like you would not be able to find the way out yourself."

Wanyan Kang said, "Where are my men?"

Lu Guanying replied, "We let them all go."

Wanyan Kang pointed to him and said, "Good, you are a man of your word. As for the rest of you leaders...until we meet again." He said rudely and arrogantly.

Just as he was about to leave the room, Master Lu suddenly called out, "Hold it! This Elder here is untalented but would like to have a taste of your 'Nine Yin White Bone Claws'."

Wanyan Kang stopped in his tracks and laughed, "Alright!"

Lu Guanying hurriedly said, "Father, you should not deal with this rascal at your age."

Master Lu replied, "Don't worry, his 'Nine Yin White Bone Claw' is not up to standard yet." He stared at Wanyan Kang and said weakly, "I am crippled and am unable to move, come here."

Wanyan Kang laughed but did not move. Lu Guanying's leg wounds were hurting but he did not want his father to fight with Wanyan Kang and leaped out of the door shouting, "I will represent my father to exchange a few blows with you." Wanyan Kang laughed and said, "Good! Let's practice again."

Master Lu shouted, "Ying'er move away!" With that, he leaped up, his left arm gripped the couch he was sitting on and he used his left arm's strength to support the weight of his body. His right palm lashed out towards Wanyan Kang's head. At the sound of the crowd's anxious gasps, Wanyan Kang raised his hands to counter the blow but felt his left wrist trapped. He'd seen the swift shadow of his opponent's palm which was heading towards his shoulder, but Wanyan Kang did not expect his opponent's seizing stance to be so fast and unique. He hurriedly used his right hand to strike back while struggling to free his left hand from his opponent's grasp. Master Lu shifted his weight onto Wanyan Kang's wrist and was able to float in midair. His left palm unleashed several killer strikes while Wanyan Kang used all his strength to escape his grip; but to no avail. He tried to unleash a flying kick towards Master Lu but missed. The crowd was delighted as they watched the ongoing fight. Master Lu raised his palm, ready to unleash a strike onto Wanyan Kang when the latter stuck out his fingers and aimed towards Master Lu's palm. Master Lu suddenly lowered his palm and struck Wanyan Kang's shoulder accupoint. Wanyan Kang felt his upper body going numb and following that, his right wrist was also seized by Master Lu. Two sounds were heard before Wanyan Kang's wrists

were released. Master Lu's stance was very quick as he used his right hand to push against Wanyan Kang's waist while his left hand pushed against Wanyan Kang's shoulder, thus borrowing Wanyan Kang's strength to leap back steadily onto his couch. Wanyan Kang felt both legs giving way and he collapsed. The section leaders were stunned and it was only after a moment's silence that they started to cheer.

Lu Guanying hurriedly ran towards the couch and asked, "Father, are you alright?"

Master Lu smiled and shook his head but his expression turned suspicious and he said, "When the teacher of this Jin dog comes for him, I will have to have a serious talk with him."

Two section leaders took some rope and tied Wanyan Kang up. Leader Zhang said, "Amongst the belongings of Commander Duan, we found iron locks and chains, let's use them for this rascal and see whether he can break them!" The crowd cheered in agreement and someone ran out to retrieve the chains and locks before returning to bind Wanyan Kang with them. The pain in his wrists was torturing him and Wanyan Kang sweated profusely; but he bore with it and refused to make a sound.

Master Lu said, "Bring him here." Two men grabbed Wanyan Kang by the shoulders and brought him in front of the couch. Master Lu tapped the accupoints of Wanyan Kang's lower spine and left chest. Wanyan Kang suddenly felt the pain subsiding and though he was still fuming inside, he was secretly surprised. Before he could say anything, he was taken away while the other section leaders slowly left the room.

Master Lu then turned towards Huang Rong and Guo Jing and smiled, "I was concentrating so hard on fighting with that young man that I forgot my manners, I hope you won't laugh."

Huang Rong saw that his palm and accupoint techniques were those of her family and was even more puzzled. She smiled and asked, "Who was that? Did he steal from the manor and thus made Master angry?"

Master Lu laughed heartily and said, "Yes, he did steal a lot from us. Come, let us not get distracted by that evil rascal; let's continue to appreciate the pieces of art."

Lu Guanying left the room to the three of them. Master Lu chatted about the scenic backdrops, human expression and more with Huang Rong while Guo Jing just listened without understanding a single thing as usual. After lunch, Master Lu ordered two servants to accompany them on a tour of the countryside and they enjoyed themselves until nightfall before returning to the manor. Before sleeping, Guo Jing asked, "Rong'er. How are we going to save him?"

Huang Rong answered, "Let's stay here for a few more days because I still can't guess Master Lu's true identity."

Guo Jing answered, "His skills are very similar to yours."

Huang Rong sighed deeply, "That's the unusual part, and, hmmm, does he know Mei Chaofeng?"

The two could not guess and were afraid that someone might eavesdrop and so did not discuss it further. In the middle of the night, they suddenly heard a slight sound on the rooftop followed by a sound on the ground. They immediately got out of their beds, quietly pushed open the window and peered out. They saw a black shadow amongst the roses. That person looked around before heading

towards the east. The person did not seem to be a resident of the manor since he or she was alert and on guard. Huang Rong had actually thought that this manor only housed heroic pirates of the lake, but after seeing Master Lu's display of skills earlier, she felt curious and decided to find out more. She waved to Guo Jing and they leaped out of the window, secretly trailing that intruder. After following that person for a while, the moonlight showed that it was a lady with average skills. Huang Rong quickened her pace and moved nearer to her. She turned her head slightly, revealing that it was Mu Nianci.

Huang Rong laughed inwardly and thought, "Good, his rescuer has come; let's see what tricks you use."

Mu Nianci circled the garden and lost sense of direction after a while. Huang Rong understood the layout of this garden since her father, Huang Yaoshi, was a master of these formations and would discuss it with her once in a while. She thought the formations in this garden unusual but it was nothing compared to those on Peach Blossom Island, which were weird and confusing, just like its owner.

Huang Rong thought to herself, "If you carry on walking like that, you won't be able to find him in a hundred years." With that, she picked up some soil from the ground and when she saw Mu Nianci hesitating in her tracks, she threw a lump of soil to the left side of the track and said in a low voice, "Go that way." before hiding behind some flowers.

Mu Nianci was alarmed; she turned around but saw no one. She grabbed her dagger and walked to the left. Huang Rong and Guo Jing's lightness skills were much better than hers and they hid themselves, not allowing her to spot them.

Mu Nianci was worried and she thought to herself, "I wonder whether this person is helping or hindering me. But since I can't find my way, I might just as well follow the directions given." With that, she followed the directions given and walked towards the left. Every time she came to a junction, she heard the sound of a lump of soil thrown to show her the way. Another lump hit the window of a small hut. Mu Nianci saw a blurred vision as two black figures quickly flew by and disappeared. Mu Nianci thought for a while and then ran towards the small hut. She saw two guards lying on the ground. Though their eyes were wide open and looking at her, they were motionless and did not make a move for their weapons. Mu Nianci guessed that they must have had their accupoints sealed by someone. Mu Nianci knew that someone was secretly helping her. She pushed open the door quietly and listened; there seemed to be someone breathing inside. She called out in a low voice, "Brother Kang, is that you?"

Wanyan Kang was surprised when he saw the guards at the door collapse; but when he heard Mu Nianci's voice, he was even more surprised and delighted. He called out softly, "It's me!"

Mu Nianci was overjoyed and walked towards the voice in the darkness and said, "Thank heaven I found you, that's good, let's go."

Wanyan Kang replied, "Did you bring any weapons?"

Mu Nianci asked, "Why?"

Wanyan Kang gently shook himself and the sounds of chains could be heard. Mu Nianci stretched out her hand and touched the chains. She was filled with regret and said furiously, "I shouldn't have given that dagger to Sister Huang!"

Huang Rong and Guo Jing were listening outside and the former silently laughed and thought to herself, "I'll let you worry for awhile before I return the dagger."

Mu Nianci was anxious and said, "I'll go and steal the keys."

Wanyan Kang replied, "Don't go. The people in this manor are highly skilled and there's no point risking yourself and getting caught."

Mu Nianci replied, "Then, I'll carry you out."

Wanyan Kang laughed, "You should give me a kiss."

Mu Nianci moved away and said, "I'm so worried and you can still joke."

Wanyan Kang laughed cheekily, "Who's joking? I'm serious."

Mu Nianci ignored him and tried to think of a plan. Wanyan Kang asked, "How did you know I'm here?"

Mu Nianci answered, "I followed you."

Wanyan Kang was touched and said, "You lean on me, I'll tell you something." Mu Nianci sat on the ground and leaned into his arms.

Wanyan Kang said, "I am the Jin Ambassador so I don't think they will dare do anything to me. But if I stay here any longer, it will affect father's plans. What shall we do? Sister, help me with something."

Mu Nianci asked, "What is it?"

Wanyan Kang answered, "Take off the golden seal hanging from my neck." Mu Nianci stretched out her hand and took off the golden seal.



Wanyan Kang continued, "This is the seal of the Jin Ambassador. Take it to Lin'an and seek assistance from Prime Minister Shi Miyuan of the Song Dynasty."

Mu Nianci asked, "Prime Minister Shi? Would he see a commoner like me?"

Wanyan Kang laughed, "When he sees this golden seal, he'll welcome you. Tell him that I've been captured by the pirates of Lake Tai and cannot see him personally. But you must remember one thing, if the Mongolian ambassador is there, make sure that you avoid letting him and the prime minister meet at all costs. This is a secret mission ordered by the Jin Emperor, you must fulfill it."

Mu Nianci asked, "Why?"

Wanyan Kang answered, "These are army matters; you won't understand. You will be doing me a great favor by telling Prime Minister Shi what I just asked you to. If the Mongolian ambassador reaches Lin'an first and meets with the Song Officials, it will put us Jin in a very unfavorable position."

Mu Nianci replied indignantly, "What 'us Jin'? I am a citizen of the Song Dynasty. If you don't explain clearly to me, I'm not going to help you with this mission."

Wanyan Kang smiled faintly, "Aren't you going to be the concubine of a Jin in the future?"

Mu Nianci stood up angrily and said, "My adoptive father was your real father; you are in fact a Han. So you still want to be a Jin Prince? I know...know you..."

Wanyan Kang answered, "What?"

Mu Nianci answered, "I always thought that you were a strong, smart and upright man. I thought you were

pretending to be the Jin Prince for a while so as to help Great Song. But you...you really want to acknowledge the enemy as your father?" Wanyan Kang heard her tone change to a furious one; she was choking with anger and could not speak for a moment.

Mu Nianci continued, "Great Song has lost half of our empire to the Jin and so many Han have been tortured and slaughtered by them. Doesn't that bother you at all? You...you..." She stopped here and could not go on. Following that, she threw the golden seal on the floor and was about to leave when Wanyan Kang called out, "Sister, I'm wrong, come back."

Mu Nianci stopped and turned, "What?"

Wanyan Kang said, "When I am freed from the burdens as Jin Ambassador, I won't go back to the Jin, alright? I will live a carefree and simple life with you, which is much better than having to suffer in silence like now."

Mu Nianci sighed and was silent. Ever since she sparred with Wanyan Kang and fell for him deeply, she had viewed him as an upright and just hero. She thought that there must be some reason that Wanyan Kang did not want to acknowledge his real father. When he became the Jin Ambassador, she thought of an excuse for him...that he was secretly spying for the Song and would help crush the enemy for the Song. Who would have guessed that it was all wishful thinking on her part; Wanyan Kang was nothing more than a greedy and shameful traitor. She was heartbroken and felt dejected.

Wanyan Kang asked in a low voice, "Sister...what's wrong?" Mu Nianci did not reply.

Wanyan Kang asked, "My mother told me that your adoptive father is my real father. I did not have a chance to

clarify it before they both died. I have been really confused all along. My birthright and origins cannot be so simply or haphazardly defined right?"

Mu Nianci was secretly comforted and thought to herself, "So he is not clear about his birthright. He cannot really be blamed then." Out loud she said, "Don't mention anything about taking the golden seal to Prime Minister Shi anymore. I will find Sister Huang and ask her for the dagger to save you."

Huang Rong had actually thought of returning the dagger to Mu Nianci but when she heard what Wanyan Kang said about aiding the Jin, she was fuming and thought, "Father hates the Jin, let him stay here for a couple more days then."

Wanyan Kang continued, "The pathways in this manor are bizarre, how did you find your way through?"

Mu Nianci replied, "Luckily there were two masters secretly directing me, though I don't know who they are and they do not want to reveal themselves."

Wanyan Kang sighed deeply, "Sister, I'm afraid that you'll be discovered the next time you come here. If you want to save me, then help me find a certain person."

Mu Nianci replied angrily, "I'm not going to find any Prime Minister for you."

Wanyan Kang replied, "Not the Prime Minister, but help me look for my teacher."

Mu Nianci replied, "Ah!"

Wanyan Kang continued, "Take my belt with you and use a knife to carve 'Wanyan Kang is in danger at Guiyun Manor [Cloud Manor] located on the west bank of Lake Tai' on the

gold buckle. After that, go to Suzhou and travel thirty li north to a deserted hill. Find nine human skulls there and stack them together into a pyramid, with five skulls at the base, followed by three in the middle and one on top. Lastly, place the belt under the top skull."

Mu Nianci was puzzled and asked, "Why?"

Wanyan Kang replied, "My teacher is blind, but when she finds the belt and feels the carvings, she will come and save me. Therefore, you must carve the words deeply."

Mu Nianci asked, "Isn't your teacher 'Eternal Spring', Taoist Qiu? How can he be blind?"

Wanyan Kang answered, "No, it's not Taoist Qiu, it's my other teacher. After you place the belt, you must leave immediately. My teacher has a weird temperament; if she finds you near the skulls, she might harm you. She is highly skilled and can save me. You just have to wait for me in front of the Xuan Miao Monastery in Suzhou. "

Mu Nianci said, "You have to swear that you will not acknowledge the enemy as your father and betray your people."

Wanyan Kang refused and replied, "After I find out the truth about everything, I will then act according to my morals. What use is it to force me to swear now? If you are not willing to save me, then so be it."

Mu Nianci replied, "Alright! I'll help you seek help." With that, she removed Wanyan Kang's belt.

Wanyan Kang asked, "Sister, are you leaving? Come over and let me kiss you."

Mu Nianci replied, "No!" With that, she stood up and headed for the door.

Wanyan Kang said, "I'm afraid that they might kill me before my teacher arrives and then I'll never get to see you again."

Mu Nianci's heart softened; she gave a long sigh and walked back into his arms, allowing him to kiss her on the cheek a few times. Then suddenly she beat on his chains and said, "If you do not walk the right path in the future, I cannot do anything but blame myself for my ill fate and will die in front of you."

Wanyan Kang wanted to cuddle and sweet-talk her a while, half hoping that she would change her mind and agree to take the golden seal to Prime Minister Shi. Then he felt her body shaking and her breathing was harsh, signaling that she was upset. He had not expected her to say anything like that and was shocked for a moment. Mu Nianci stood up and walked out of the door.

When she came out, Huang Rong again guided her and Mu Nianci ran till she saw a wall leading to the outside of the manor. Before she left, she called out softly, "Since senior does not want to show him or herself, this junior will just have to look to the sky and express my gratitude." With that, she kneeled on the ground and kowtowed three times. She heard a gentle giggle and a clear voice spoke out, "Ah, I cannot accept this!"

When she raised her head, she only saw stars in the sky and the empty surroundings. Mu Nianci was puzzled and thought that the voice sounded like Huang Rong's, but how could she be here and how would she know the way around this confusing place? She pondered this matter as she walked along but was not able to come up with an explanation. After walking about ten li [5km / 3+ miles] from the manor, she decided to rest under a large tree and wait for the boat that would take her to Suzhou the next day.

Suzhou is a busy city in the Southeast and although it isn't comparable to the capital of Hangzhou, it is still a prosperous and booming place. The Song officials in the South also ruled the territory of Jiangnan and had almost forgotten about the suffering of the people under the Jin in the North. Since the cities of Suzhou and Hangzhou were rich and prosperous it gave rise to a saying 'Heaven above, Su Hang below' indicating the importance and grandeur of these two cities. Actually, the River Huai was the source of wealth and also a symbol of beauty for these two cities in the south.

Mu Nianci admired the colorful scenery in the city before settling down at an inn. Then she carefully started to carve the words Wanyan Kang had told her onto his belt. She thought about how recently the belt had left its owner and prayed for Wanyan Kang's safety, hoping that the belt would return to its owner once more. She secretly wished that Wanyan Kang would come to his senses and marry her and that she would personally help him put the belt on. After daydreaming awhile, she placed the belt beneath her robe and couldn't help thinking, "This belt is like his arm, wrapping around my waist." She immediately blushed and didn't dare think more. After eating a quick bowl of noodles, she saw the sun moving to the west and she hurriedly traveled towards the north, following Wanyan Kang's instructions to find his teacher.

The road on the hill was deserted and Mu Nianci felt uneasy when she heard weird sounds made by the birds and the sun had begun to set as well. She left the main path and went to the valley on the other side of the hill to search for the skulls which Wanyan Kang had asked her to search for. As it slowly turned to night she was still unable to find them. She mulled over the matter and decided to continue the search the next day. With that, she went to see if there was

any place nearby in which she could seek shelter for the night. She ran up a mound, looked out into the distance and spotted a manor to the west. She was relieved and immediately rushed there.

As she approached the place, she realized that the manor was actually a rundown temple and there was a signboard above the door, which read 'Temple Earth'. She pushed open the door gently and the door gave a creak before falling down, blowing up a pile of dust. It was then that Mu Nianci realized that it was an abandoned temple and no one lived there. She walked into the hall and saw cobwebs on the statues of mother [tu di po] and father [tu di gong] earth. She pressed on a table and gave it a blow but found that the table was still sturdy and did not break. She found some hay to clean the table with and went on to place the broken door back into position. She ate some dried food before lying on the table and slept with her travel-bag as her pillow. She could not help but feel heartbroken and ashamed when she thought about Wanyan Kang's personality and tears rolled down her cheeks. But when she thought about his gentleness and honeyed words, she felt a hint of warmth in her heart. She thought about many things and tossed what seemed a million times before she was finally able to fall asleep.

In the middle of the night, Mu Nianci heard a funny noise. Alarmed, she sat upright as the noise grew louder. She hurried to the door and peered out. It was then that she got the shock of her life as the moonlight shone onto the ground, revealing thousands of snakes gliding along. The stench came in through the door. After what seemed a long while, the number of snakes began to lessen and she then heard footsteps as three men in white appeared with long poles in their hands, controlling the snakes. Mu Nianci was afraid that she would be discovered and hid behind the hall

door, not daring to look any longer. She heard a few footsteps and peered out again. The snakes were gone and the surroundings were quiet and deserted. She thought she must be dreaming and she couldn't believe what she had just seen.

She opened the main door quietly and peered out. She walked a little in the direction that the snakes had gone but could not find those men in white. She was somewhat relieved and was about to return to the temple when she saw the moonlight shining on a strange pile of white objects in the distance. She went for a closer look and let out a low gasp; it was a pile of skulls neatly arranged in the form of a pyramid, with five on the bottom, three in the middle and one on top. She'd searched for them during the day but found nothing. Now suddenly, they had appeared in front of her in the middle of the night. She found the skull formation scary but her heart beat fast since she was happy to have found them. She approached the skulls slowly and took out Wanyan Kang's belt. With hands shaking, she reached out to lift the skull stacked on top. She touched the skull and felt five holes in it which fitted her five fingers; it was as if the skull had formed mouths, which swallowed her fingers. Mu Nianci was astonished and screamed before turning about to run. She had run awhile when she stopped again and realized that she was just scaring herself. She giggled nervously and went back to put the belt on top of the three skulls before placing the skull in her hands back onto the top of the formation.

She thought to herself, "His teacher is really weird; I wonder whether she looks frightening as well." After placing the skull back into place, she secretly wished, "I hope that teacher will get the belt and immediately go and save him. I hope that you will teach him properly so that he ends his bad habits and changes his ways."



She was thinking about the chained up handsome sweet-talker Wanyan Kang when she felt someone gently patting her shoulder. She was shocked and did not dare turn around. Due to her nervousness, she accidentally fell onto the pile of skulls. Mu Nianci clutched her chest and turned around. As she turned someone gently patted her shoulder again. She turned around about six more times but still could not spot the person behind her; she didn't know whether it was ghost or a demon. Mu Nianci broke out in cold sweat and did not dare move. Quivering, she asked, "Who are you?"

The person placed his head near her neck and sniffed before laughing, "What a nice scent! Guess who I am."

Mu Nianci hurriedly turned around and saw a scholarly dressed man with a fan in his hand and a charming expression: It was one of the culprits who had forced her godfather to commit suicide back in Yanjing, Ouyang Ke. She was both surprised and angry; but since she knew that she was not his match, she turned to run. Ouyang Ke was, however, already in front of her laughing with arms out stretched ready to hug her if she took a few more steps. Mu Nianci retreated hurriedly then ran to her right. She had only run a few steps when Ouyang Ke was in front of her again. She ran in all directions but still could not escape him.

Ouyang Ke saw the pale colour of her beautiful face and was delighted. He knew that he could capture her in one move but he wanted to play the cat and mouse game with her, trapping her and letting her run again. Mu Nianci knew that she was in danger and pulled out a green dagger, aiming for his eyes.

Ouyang Ke laughed and said, "Aiya, don't be rough." He twisted his body, grabbed her arms with his left hand while

holding her waist with his right arm. Mu Nianci struggled but felt numbness in her throat and her dagger had already been snatched away by Ouyang Ke. She managed to free herself after awhile only to be captured in his arms again. The way he held her was similar to the way he'd seized Huang Rong at Wanyan Kang's residence causing her own hands to seal her accupoints and immobilizing herself.

Ouyang Ke laughed lightly and said, "Accept me as your teacher and I'll immediately release you and teach you this stance; but I'm afraid that by that time, you won't want me to let go of you."

Mu Nianci was trapped by his arm and Ouyang Ke used his right hand to gently brush against her cheeks. She knew that he was up to no good and was so frightened that she passed out. After awhile, Mu Nianci woke up but she felt numb and weak all over. Someone was hugging her tightly and in the confusion, she thought it was Wanyan Kang and was delighted. Then she opened her eyes and realized that the person hugging her was Ouyang Ke. She was embarrassed and nervous and struggled to stand up only to realize that she could not move. She opened her mouth to call out but realized that Ouyang Ke had stuffed a handkerchief in her mouth. He was sitting on the ground but he wore an anxious expression. On both sides of Ouyang Ke were eight women in white each with a weapon in their hands and all of them staring suspiciously but silently at the pile of skulls.

Mu Nianci was curious and tried to think what they were up to. When she turned her head, she was frightened out of her wits as she saw thousands of green snakes behind Ouyang Ke. The snakes were motionless but were hissing as their tongues flicked out. The moonlight shone on what looked like a sea of red tongues; it was a frightening sight. Amongst the snakes stood three men in white with long

poles in their hands; they were the same men Mu Nianci had seen earlier. She didn't dare look anymore and turned away. It was then that she saw the shiny gold belt amongst the nine skulls and thought anxiously, "Ah, they must be waiting for his teacher. From their expressions, they must be prepared to deal with his teacher. If his teacher comes alone, how could so many people be defeated? And there are so many poisonous snakes around as well."

She was extremely anxious and hoped that Wanyan Kang's teacher wouldn't come. But she also hoped that his teacher would know what to expect and come prepared, defeat these evil people and save her. After waiting for more than half an hour, the moon rose ever higher and she saw Ouyang Ke constantly looking up at the moon. She thought to herself, "Will his teacher only appear when the moon reaches the middle of the sky?"

She saw the moon rise above the top of a tree. The surroundings were empty, the worms were making sounds in the earth and there were the calls of birds in the distance. Ouyang Ke glanced at the moon once more before placing Mu Nianci into the arms of a woman beside him. He took out his fan with his right hand and stared at the edge of the hill. Mu Nianci knew that the person they were waiting for was coming soon. The silence was soon broken by a strong and piercing flute tune, which grew nearer after awhile. A figure flashed by as a woman with long hair suddenly appeared from the cliff. As she passed by she slowed down; it seemed like she had noticed that there were people nearby. It was 'Iron Corpse', Mei Chaofeng.

After Mei Chaofeng had gotten a few verses of the secret formulae for the cultivation of her internal energy from Guo Jing, she studied them carefully and it was not more than a month before her legs recovered and she could move normally. Furthermore, her internal energy had improved

tremendously. Ever since she found out that the Six Freaks of Jiangnan had returned from Mongolia, she had started to plot revenge while following the 'Little Prince' as he set out on his mission. She practiced her skills every night. Mei Chaofeng found riding boats with many people inconvenient and thus decided to travel by herself at night. She had arranged to meet Wanyan Kang in Suzhou. She did not know that Wanyan Kang was in the hands of the Heroes of Lake Tai, nor was she aware that Ouyang Ke, who wanted to take revenge on her for killing his men and humiliating him earlier, wanted to lay hands on her 'Nine Yin Manual'. He had earlier searched for and found out her whereabouts, gathered together thousands of snakes and was now secretly waiting for her at the spot she practiced her skills every night. She had just passed by when she heard the breathing of several people and immediately stopped in her tracks to listen. She heard many weird noises behind the group of people.

Ouyang Ke saw her alarmed expression and cursed inwardly, "What a brilliant blind Bitch!" Fanning himself gently, he stood up and summoned his internal energy. He was about to strike out at Mei Chaofeng when he saw another person coming from the cliff. He hurriedly took back his strike and studied that person. He saw that the man was slim and tall; he was wearing a green robe and part of his hair was bound with a squared cloth. He looked like any cultured person but Ouyang Ke was unable to see his face clearly.

The amazing thing, however, was that Ouyang Ke was unable to hear any footsteps or breathing coming from that man. Even a highly skilled person like Mei Chaofeng would inevitably make some light noises when she walked; but this person was walking casually, as if his body were floating, forming a somewhat ghostly image. It seemed as if nothing

would cause him to make any noises while moving. That person glanced at Ouyang Ke before standing behind Mei Chaofeng. Ouyang Ke studied his face in detail and gasped. That person had a very strange face and aside from a pair of eyes glancing around, the rest of his face was like a dead person's. Although the skin was stiff, it was not ugly but neither was it appealing. The man looked extremely cold and emotionless and it gave one chills. Ouyang Ke regained his senses and saw that Mei Chaofeng was approaching him. He knew that her strikes were going to be vicious and deadly and knew he had to gain the upper hand first. He made a signal with his left hand and the three men controlling the snakes started blowing their flutes, causing the snakes to glide forward. The eight women in white sat still since they had applied some substance which caused the snakes to ignore them and slither past.

Mei Chaofeng heard the sounds of snakes approaching and knew there were countless numbers of them. She was alarmed and jumped back some distance. The snake men used their poles to urge the thousands of snakes to disperse in all directions. Mu Nianci saw that Mei Chaofeng's expression had paled with fear and could not help but worry for her. She thought, "Is this strange woman his teacher?" She saw Mei Chaofeng suddenly turn around and uncoil a long silver whip from her waist to protect herself. She was however surrounded by the poisonous snakes and several snakes, which were excited by the flute tune began to attack her, only to be slashed by her whip.

Ouyang Ke yelled, "Demoness Mei, I don't want your life. You just have to hand me the 'Nine Yin Manual' and I'll let you go."

When he was at Prince Zhao's residence, he heard that the 'Nine Yin Manual' was in Mei Chaofeng's hands and, being greedy as he was, he was very much tempted to get it at

any cost. It would definitely make his uncle, who had tried every means to get the manual, very happy. Mei Chaofeng ignored Ouyang Ke and used her whip to strike out even more furiously.

Ouyang Ke called out, "Since you're so stubborn, I'll see how long you can dance. I'll wait until tomorrow and we'll see whether or not you will hand the manual over to me."

Mei Chaofeng was very anxious and tried thinking of a plan to escape. She listened carefully and realized that there were snakes everywhere. She didn't dare move much and she was afraid that the poisonous snakes would bite her if she stepped on them.

Ouyang Ke sat down and after awhile, called out arrogantly, "Sister Mei, you stole the manual and have been familiarizing yourself with the contents for the past twenty years. What use is it to die trying to keep it? Why not lend it to me for a look and let's be friends, isn't it better that way?"

Mei Chaofeng replied, "Take the snakes away first."

Ouyang Ke laughed, "Hand me the manual first."

The contents of the 'Nine Yin Manual' were tattooed on her late husband's skin and Mei Chaofeng valued it more than her life. She was, of course, unwilling to hand it over. She decided that if she was bitten by the snakes, she would immediately tear the manual to pieces.

Mu Nianci wanted to shout and tell her to jump onto a tree so that the snakes would not be able to bite her but she could not do so since a cloth bound her mouth. Mei Chaofeng was not aware of the few tall trees near her. She realized that if she continued fighting, her internal energy

would deplete and thus pulled out something from her pocket and shouted, "Alright, I give in, take it."

Ouyang Ke called out, "Throw it over here."

Mei Chaofeng called out, "Catch", and flung something with her right hand.

Mu Nianci heard a few faint cries and saw two women in white collapse. Ouyang Ke had fallen onto the ground and managed to avoid her deadly concealed weapons. He broke out in cold sweat and was both shocked and angry. He retreated a few steps and yelled, "Alright Bitch, I'll let you suffer horribly!"

Mei Chaofeng had shot out three 'Shapeless Needles' which traveled as fast as lightning. She was secretly impressed with Ouyang Ke's ability to escape her attack and was all the more anxious. Ouyang Ke studied her arms and plotted to set the snakes on her once she relaxed a little. By this time, Mei Chaofeng had already killed hundreds of snakes but there were thousands more surrounding her. How would she be able to kill all of them? Ouyang Ke saw that her whip skills were excellent and knew that she had hidden weapons and thus did not dare to go near her.

After half an hour, the moon moved towards the west and Mei Chaofeng was beginning to feel more and more anxious and her breathing became harder. Her whipping dance was not as smooth as earlier and she therefore struck out at shorter distances so as to preserve her energy. Ouyang Ke was delighted and commanded the snakes to move nearer and nearer to her. But he was also afraid that if she was still unwilling to surrender and destroyed the book, it would ruin his plans. This point in time was crucial to him. Mei Chaofeng heard the snakes moving closer and closer to her and could not help but touch the manual in her pocket. She

looked very pale and cursed silently, "I haven't obtained my revenge yet and who would have thought that I would die at the hands of this bloody rascal."

Suddenly, there came a noise which sounded like the tune from a qin [zither], but it also sounded like the sounds made by jade. Following that, there was the sound of a clear and smooth flute tune. Everyone was taken by surprise. Ouyang Ke looked up and saw the odd man in green sitting on top of a tall tree, playing his flute. Ouyang Ke was puzzled. He knew that he had very sharp eyesight and yet, even under such bright moonlight, he did not notice that that man had gone up the tree. The wind was blowing and the trees were swaying but that man was still able to sit steady and motionless on top. Ouyang Ke had been taught by his uncle since he was young and he knew that even if he trained for another twenty years, he would be unable to achieve the standards of this man. Is that man a ghost then?

By this time, the tune from the flute was flowing continuously and Ouyang Ke lost control of his emotions and was smiling unnaturally. He felt his blood pounding and rushing inside him and had to dance crazily in order to feel better. He had just stretched out his arm to dance and was shocked. He summoned all his concentration and noticed that all of the snakes were rushing to the bottom of a tree and writhing about following the flute's tune. The three men and six women in white moved under the tree as well dancing around crazily. They tore their clothing and scratched their faces furiously leaving bloody streaks on them while laughing stupidly at nothing. It seemed like they had all gone mad and unaware of any pain.

Ouyang Ke was extremely shocked and knew that he had encountered a strong opponent tonight. He took out six poisoned projectiles and flung them towards the man's head, chest and limbs. The projectiles were about to strike



the man when he gently waved the end of his flute and blocked the projectiles. When he used his flute to block the projectiles, his lips continued to blow and did not leave the flute hole for a single moment. The tune coming out from the flute was not interrupted for a single second. Ouyang Ke could not stand it any longer and opened his fan, again wanting to dance.

Luckily Ouyang Ke had a rather good grasp of his internal energy and knew that if he started dancing, unless his opponent stopped blowing the flute, he would not stop dancing until he died of exhaustion. Ouyang Ke was a clear-minded and sharp man and forced himself to take back his arm with the fan in it. He suddenly thought of a plan, "I'll tear some cloth off my robe and stuff the cloth in my ears so as to block the sound." But the flute sound was marvelous and, although Ouyang Ke had torn off some cloth, the flute tune made him lose control of his actions; he struggled but could not put the cloth into his ears. He was alarmed and frightened and broke out in a cold sweat. He saw Mei Chaofeng sitting on the ground with her head lowered, circulating her internal energy. He guessed that she was summoning her internal energy to combat the flute's sound.

At this moment, three of Ouyang Ke's least skilled apprentices had fallen onto the ground, ripping and tearing their clothing while twisting and turning uncontrollably. Mu Nianci had her accupoints sealed and could not move. Even though her emotions and concentration was deeply disturbed and provoked by the flute's tune, she did not kick or dance madly because she could not move and just lay silently on the ground.

Ouyang Ke's cheeks had turned bright red, his head was burning and his throat was dry and uncomfortable. He knew that if he did not stop this now and escape, he would die. He summoned up all his determination and bit on his

tongue. The pain diverted his attention from the flute tune and the sound had less impact on him for a moment. He grabbed this opportunity to escape and ran for his life. It was not until he was several li away from the place and he could not hear the flute sound anymore that he felt relieved. Ouyang Ke was thoroughly exhausted and felt extremely weak, as if he had fallen very ill. He thought to himself, "Who is that strange man? Who is that strange man?"

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Meanwhile, Huang Rong and Guo Jing returned to their rooms to sleep after they sent Mu Nianci off. They were pleased with their relaxing trip on the lake so far. Guo Jing knew that once Mu Nianci was off, Mei Chaofeng would soon appear. She was vicious and deadly in her attacks. He worried that there will be no one to match her and many people would get hurt. Guo Jing decided to consult Huang Rong and asked her, "I think we better tell Master Lu about Mei Chaofeng and plead with him to let Wanyan Kang go and save the people in the manor from any injury."

Huang Rong waved her hand and replied, "That's not a good idea. Wanyan Kang is an evil brat; let him suffer a few more days. If he is let off so easily, then he will not learn his lesson." Actually Huang Rong couldn't care less about whether Wanyan Kang repented or not. She thought that since he was the disciple of 'two bad eggs' Qiu Chuji and Mei Chaofeng, then he might as well stay a baddie. She thought it fun making life difficult for Wanyan Kang. But Huang Rong was also afraid that if Wanyan Kang did not repent Mu Nianci would not marry him and if Mu Nianci does not have a husband, the busybodies would once again try to force Guo Jing to marry her. This would be disastrous. Therefore, she decided that it would be better for Wanyan Kang to repent.

Guo Jing asked, "What shall we do if Mei Chaofeng arrives?"

Huang Rong smiled, "Then we'll try out what Qigong taught us on her!"

Guo Jing knew that it was pointless to argue with Huang Rong and so returned her smile. But he thought that since Master Lu had taken such good care of them, he would risk his life to protect everyone in the manor no matter what.

Two days later they told Master Lu that they would not leave just yet. Master Lu was even nicer to them since he had hoped that they would stay longer. On the third morning, Master Lu was chatting with Huang Rong and Guo Jing in his study when Lu Guanying rushed in with a pale face. Behind him was one of the housekeepers who carried a wooden tray. There was something on the tray wrapped up with a green cloth.

Lu Guanying said, "Father, someone sent this just now." With that, he removed the green cloth to reveal a white skull with five finger holes in it; it was indeed Mei Chaofeng's work.

Guo Jing and Huang Rong were not surprised, since they knew that Mei Chaofeng would appear sooner or later. Master Lu was however shocked and he paled. Quivering, he asked, "Who...who brought this here?" He straightened his body as he asked.

Lu Guanying knew that skull appeared strange but he was a daring and skilled fighter and furthermore, he was the leader of the pirates of the lake. Therefore he did not really take this matter too seriously. But when he saw how upset his father was, he was surprised and even more frightened. He answered hurriedly, "Someone put this in a box and sent it here. The housekeeper thought it was a normal gift and

tipped the person without asking its origins. When he brought it to the accounts room and opened the box, he found the skull and when he went to ask the person who sent the gift that person was already gone. "Father, what do you think is going on here?"

Master Lu did not answer but inserted his fingers into the holes in the skull, which fitted his fingers perfectly. Lu Guanying asked in shock, "The holes in the skull are made by fingers? Are fingers that powerful?"

Master Lu nodded and sighed deeply before saying, "Ask the servants to pack up and send your mother to the north manor in the city to stay for the time being. Order the section leaders to gather and stay with their sections for three days. No matter what happens to Cloud Manor, tell them not to interfere."

Lu Guanying was astonished and asked, "Why, father?"

Master Lu smiled weakly and turned towards Guo Jing and Huang Rong saying, "It is a blessing to be able to make friends with both of you. I had hoped that you could stay longer but I made two enemies when I was younger and they are coming to seek revenge. It's not that I want to chase you away but Cloud Manor is...is in danger. If I am fortunate enough to survive, we will meet again; but ... but there is only a slight chance of that." He laughed bitterly and shook his head before turning to the study keeper and said, "Bring forty gold taels to me." The keeper left to do so. Lu Guanying did not dare ask any more questions and left the study to carry out his father's instructions.

After a while, the keeper came back with the money and Master Lu offered it to Guo Jing saying, "The lady is beautiful and talented and is a perfect match for you. This

small amount of money is for your upcoming marriage ceremony; please accept this humble gift."

Huang Rong blushed and thought, "This person is very sharp, he knew all along that I was a girl. But how did he know that I am not married to Jing ge ge?"

Guo Jing did not know the art of politeness and just thanked Master Lu before accepting the gift. Master Lu then retrieved a glass bottle from the study table and poured out more than ten red pills before wrapping them up in some paper. He continued, "I am not talented but my teacher taught me some medical formulas and I used them to make these pills which can prolong lives when taken. Take them as a form of my respect."

When Master Lu poured out the pills there was a sweet scent in the air. When Huang Rong smelled it, she knew immediately that those were the 'Nine Flower Jade Dew Pills'. She had helped her father make those pills before and had to collect the dewdrops from nine different types of flowers. To make the pills, one had to know how to brew the substance on the correct days and season of the year. It was a very painstaking process and the pills consisted of many different types of scarce and precious herbs.

Huang Rong knew that Master Lu was being too generous giving them so many and spoke out, "It is not easy to create the 'Nine Flower Jade Dew Pills'. We would be more than grateful to accept two pills each."

Master Lu was slightly surprised and asked, "How did Miss know the name of the pills?"

Huang Rong answered, "I know because I was weak when I was young and an honorable master gave me three pills which had positive effects when I took them."

Master Lu showed a smile and said, "You don't have to resist my offer. It would be a waste to keep them anyway." Huang Rong knew that he was prepared to die and so did not argue and kept the pills.

Master Lu continued in a serious tone, "I have already prepared a boat so please cross the lake quickly. Even if you notice something strange, do not bother to stop. Remember this!"

Guo Jing wanted to stay and help but he caught Huang Rong's eye signal and had no choice but to agree with Master Lu.

Huang Rong said, "Forgive little sister for her ignorance, but I have something to ask."

Master Lu answered, "Please speak, Miss."

Huang Rong replied, "Since Master Lu knows that there are formidable enemies coming to seek revenge, why not hide from them? As the saying goes, a hero avoids obvious dangers."

Master Lu let out a huge sigh and answered, "Those two people have made me suffer so much! They are the ones who caused me to be crippled. For the past twenty years I have not sought revenge because I am unable to walk. Since they are coming now, no matter what, I will risk my life to fight them. Anyway, they offended my teacher. Even if I am unable to seek revenge for myself, I will definitely have to seek revenge for my teacher at all costs. I don't hope to defeat them. I am more than happy as long as I can die together with them and thus, repay my teacher's kindness."

Huang Rong thought, "How come he keeps saying there are two people? Ah, I know, he still thinks that 'Copper Corpse', Chen Xuanfeng, is alive. I wonder what animosity he bears

towards them? It is unfortunate for him but I won't probe further, although I am still curious about something."

Huang Rong asked out loud, "Master Lu, it's not surprising that you were able to see through my male disguise but how did you know that we are not married since we stayed in the same room?"

Master Lu was dumbfounded by her question and thought to himself, "It's obvious that she is still a virgin but how do I explain it to her? This little Miss is intelligent and talented in all areas but how come she's so blind when it comes to matters like these?" He was thinking of a way to answer her when Lu Guanying entered the study and said in a low voice, "I have given the command but leaders Zhang, Gu, Wang and Tan refuse to leave. They say that they will remain in Cloud Manor even if it means risking their lives."

Master Lu sighed and said, "It is not often that you find such loyal and courageous people! Hurry and send these two guests off."

Huang Rong and Guo Jing bid Master Lu farewell before following Lu Guanying out. The housekeeper had already prepared Guo Jing's little red horse and their donkey on the boat. Guo Jing whispered to Huang Rong, "Are we going to get on the boat?"

Huang Rong whispered back, "We'll leave and come back."

Lu Guanying wasn't bothered by their whispering since he was in a state of confusion and wanted to hurriedly send off the guests so as to be able to help out with the preparations against his father's enemies. Guo Jing and Huang Rong were about to board the boat when Huang Rong spied someone on the bank, walking fast towards them. The person looked strange since he was supporting a huge jar on his head as he walked towards them without a pause.

When he came nearer, Guo Jing, Huang Rong and Lu Guanying saw that the man's hair was white; he wore a short yellow robe and carried a huge feather fan in his right hand, fanning himself gently as he quickened his pace. The jar looked as if it was made from iron and seemed like it weighed a hundred jin [110lbs / 50kg].

The man walked past Lu Guanying, glanced nonchalantly at them and continued walking. He had not taken but a few steps more when his body hunched a little and some water spilled out from the jar. The three then realized that the jar was filled with water, which would now weigh about a hundred jin more. The old man must be highly skilled to be able to balance such a heavy weight on his head.

Lu Guanying thought nervously, "Is this man father's enemy?" He ignored the danger and went up to the man, while Guo Jing and Huang Rong stole a glance at each other before following him. Guo Jing heard his six teachers mention their fight with Qiu Chuji at the 'Pavilion of the Drunken Immortal' before and knew that Qiu Chuji was skilled enough to lift up a huge jar. But the size of the jar Qiu Chuji lifted as described by his teachers did not seem as big as this jar the man was lifting now. Guo Jing suspected that this old man's skills were above those of 'Eternal Spring' Master Qiu Chuji. The old man walked on before reaching the bank of a small river with graves all over the place.

Lu Guanying thought to himself, "There is no bridge here so let's see whether he crosses the river to the north or goes towards the west."

Lu Guanying was stunned by what he saw next: The old man walked without a pause over the river; his body was steady and only his lower legs were submerged in the water. When he reached the opposite side of the river he



placed the huge jar on the grasses next to a hill before returning to the river and walking on the water back to the other side again.

Huang Rong and Guo Jing had heard their seniors talk about all sorts of skills from various sects and schools but they never heard of the skills which the old man just displayed: Carrying a huge jar on his head and walking on water. They'd thought that such skills only existed in myths and legends; who would have thought that such skills do actually exist on earth? If they had not seen for themselves, they would never have believed such stuff and were secretly in awe of this old master.

The old man's hair was white and he laughed heartily before turning to Lu Guanying, "You must be the leader of the pirates, Junior Master Lu right?"

Lu Guanying bowed and answered, "I dare not accept such praise, I wonder what is elder's name?"

The old man pointed towards Guo Jing and Huang Rong and said, "You two boys come here as well."

Lu Guanying turned around and got a surprise when he saw Guo Jing and Huang Rong behind him. It was then that he realized that the two had been following him. Their lightness skills were so good that they made no noise and he was not even aware of them following him. Guo Jing and Huang Rong bowed and said, "Greetings to elder."

The old man laughed, "No need for such greetings." He turned towards Lu Guanying and said, "Here is not a place to talk, let's find somewhere to sit."

Lu Guanying was suspicious and thought, "Is he father's enemy?" He decided to be direct and asked, "Does elder know my father?"

The old man replied, "Master Lu? I have never met him before."

Lu Guanying thought that the man didn't seem like he was lying and asked some more, "My father received a strange gift earlier in the day, does elder know of this matter?"

The old man asked, "What strange gift?"

Lu Guanying replied, "It's a dead person's skull on the top of which is five finger holes."

The old man said, "That's funny; could it be someone playing with your father?"

Lu Guanying thought silently, "This man's skills are exceptional. Even if he wants to fight father, he would do so openly and does not need to lie about it. It seems like he really doesn't know anything. Why not invite him to the manor to help us instead? If he agrees to help us, it will be alright no matter how great father's enemy is." The more he thought about it, the more delighted he was and answered, "If elder does not mind, why not come to my residence for some tea?"

The old man hummed slightly and replied, "That will be good." Lu Guanying was overjoyed and waved for the old man to go first.

The old man pointed towards Guo Jing and said, "These two young men are guests of the manor right?"

Lu Guanying answered, "They are father's friends." The old man did not probe further and walked in front with Guo Jing and Huang Rong following behind Lu Guanying. When they reached the manor, Lu Guanying ushered the old man to a seat in the main hall and sped off to find his father.

Not long after, two servants carried in a bamboo couch with Master Lu on it. Master Lu greeted the old man politely and said, "I hope my ignorant son has not offended elder in any way."

The old man shifted his body slightly but did not greet him back. He replied blandly, "Master Lu may dispense with the formalities."

Master Lu asked, "I wonder what elder's name is?"

The old man replied, "My surname is Qiu and my name is Qianren."

Master Lu was shocked and asked, "Could it be that elder is the renowned 'Iron Palm Who Floats on Water', elder Qiu?"

Qiu Qianren smiled slightly and answered, "To think that you can remember my nickname, you really have a good memory. I have not been active in Jianghu for the past twenty years and thought that people had long forgotten me!"

The name 'Iron Palm Who Floats on Water' was indeed a formidable name twenty years ago. Master Lu knew that the old man was the chief of the Iron Palm Sect in Hunan. He had been famous and active in Jianghu but had disappeared suddenly for a very long time so it was not surprising that many juniors born later would not know of him.

Master Lu was surprised and curious by his visit and asked, "I wonder what has caused Senior Qiu to come here? If you need junior's help, I would be more than happy to offer it."

Qiu Qianren stroked his beard and laughed, "It's nothing big actually, just that I have been too softhearted and fate has it that it will not end...um, I would like to seek a

secluded place to practice my skills; we'll talk again in the night."

Master Lu saw that he wore no evil expression but was still unsettled and asked, "I wonder, did Senior happen to meet the 'Twin Killers of the Dark Winds'?"

Qiu Qianren replied, "The 'Twin Killers of the Dark Winds'? That evil pair are not dead yet?"

Master Lu was greatly comforted by what he heard and spoke out, "Ying'er, please bring Senior Qiu to my study to rest." Qiu Qianren gave everyone a nod and left with Lu Guanying.

Although Master Lu had never seen Qiu Qianren's skills before, he had heard his formidable name. He knew that when the five greats, Eastern Heretic, Western Poison, Southern Emperor, Northern Beggar and Central Divinity met for the Hua Shan tournament, they had invited him but he had something to attend to and thus turned down the invitation. His skills must have been exceptional to get the invitation; even if he was not up to the level of the greats, he should not be far from their standards. Should the 'Twin Killers of the Dark Winds' come, they would not be able to mess around with him.

He turned to Guo Jing and Huang Rong, "You haven't gone? That's very good. The Elder Qiu's skills are formidable, how lucky that he should appear at this moment. I do not have to fear my opponents any longer! Later on you can rest in your rooms but please do not leave them and you'll be fine."

Huang Rong gave a little laugh, "Can I watch the fun?"

Master Lu let out a deep sigh and replied, "I'm afraid that my enemy will bring lots of people so I'm afraid that I won't be able to protect myself and will allow you two to be hurt."

Alright then, but you two must stick with me. With Senior Qiu around, it will be useless no matter how many people they bring!"

Huang Rong clapped her hands in delight and laughed, "I love seeing people fight. It was so interesting that day you defeated that Little Jin Prince."

Master Lu replied, "This time it will be the Little Prince's teacher who is much more skilful than him; that's why I'm worried."

Huang Rong answered, "Ah! How do you know?"

Master Lu replied, "Miss Huang, you won't understand these fighting matters. That claw technique which the Little Jin Prince used to attack my Ying'er's thigh is the same as the skill used to create those finger holes in the top of the skull."

Huang Rong answered, "Oh, I understand now. Wang Xianzhi's calligraphy was taught by Wang Yizhi and Wang Yizhi was taught by Lady Wei whose teacher was Zhong You. Thus, any professional would be able to guess the family or sect the calligrapher belongs to merely by looking at his works."

Master Lu laughed, "Miss is highly intelligent. I just have to give you a hint and you are able to understand everything. My two opponents are evil and vicious. Compared to Zhong Wang, they have smeared the reputation of their teacher and ancestors."

Huang Rong pulled Guo Jing's hand and said, "Let's see what great skill the white bearded Grandpa is practicing."

Master Lu was alarmed and said, "Ah, don't...don't disturb him."

Huang Rong laughed, "It's alright," and stood up to leave.

Master Lu was sitting on the couch and could not move. He thought nervously, "This young lady is too mischievous. How can she spy on him?"

He hurriedly ordered the servants to lift up the bamboo couch and hurry to the study to stop them. When he reached it he saw them bending down and looking into the room through a hole made in the paper covering the window frame. When Huang Rong heard the servants' footsteps she hurriedly turned and signaled to them not to make a single sound; at the same time she waved to Master Lu asking him to come over and see.

Master Lu was afraid that if he did not go over, the little miss would throw a tantrum and alert Qiu Qianren. He immediately ordered the servants to walk silently and help him over to the window. When he looked through the hole Huang Rong made, he was baffled to see Qiu Qianren sitting cross-legged with eyes shut and smoke continuously coming out of his mouth.

Master Lu's teacher was highly skilled and knowledgeable. When he trained under him in his younger days, he often heard his teacher talk about the various skills of different sects and schools but had never heard of a skill involving breathing out smoke. He did not dare look longer and pulled Guo Jing's sleeve, signaling him not to look anymore. Guo Jing respected him and besides, he never thought it proper to spy on others. Guo Jing immediately stood up and took Huang Rong by the hand, following Master Lu back to the hall.

Huang Rong giggled, "That old fellow's skills are fun. There's a fire burning inside his stomach!"

Master Lu answered, "You do not understand. This is an amazing type of internal energy."

Huang Rong asked, "Could he breathe out fire to burn someone?" Huang Rong was not joking as she said this; she was indeed curious about Qiu Qianren's mysterious skills.

Master Lu replied, "No one can breathe out fire, but to be able to attain such profound internal skills would mean that he can probably injure someone using mere flowers and leaves."

Huang Rong laughed, "Ah, tear a flower to hurt someone!"

Master Lu smiled slightly and answered, "Miss is very smart."

There was a poem entitled 'Barbaric Buddhist' which was written by an anonymous poet during the Tang dynasty, which read: "When the peonies reveal real pearls, a beauty walks by the hall.

With a gentle laugh, she asks the gentleman, 'Which is prettier, the flower or the lady?' The gentleman mulls it over and answers, 'The flower is beautiful.' The lady throws a mild tantrum and flings the smashed flower at him." [The underlying meaning is actually used to refer to an insolent woman, who is not respected. In the past, the ideal woman is supposed to be gentle and docile.]

The poem thus spread far and wide. Once, there was a court case in which an evil wife broke her husband's legs. When the Tang Emperor, Xuanzhong learned about it, he laughed and said to his Prime Minister "Isn't this tearing a flower to hurt someone?"

Master Lu was relieved when he saw how powerful Qiu Qianren was. He ordered Lu Guanying to send people to inspect the lake and politely invite any suspicious-looking

person back to the manor. He also ordered the servants to open the main entrance to the manor so as to welcome any guests. Evening came and the servants lit many candles in the main hall of Cloud Manor. The bright lights surrounded the whole hall, as if waiting for a banquet to begin. Lu Guanying personally went to invite Qiu Qianren to the hall in which he was offered the middle host seat. Guo Jing and Huang Rong sat beside him while Master Lu and his son sat on seats beneath their tables. Master Lu made his toasts but did not dare ask Qiu Qianren the purpose of his visit and only engaged in casual talk with his guests.

After drinks, Qiu Qianren spoke out, "Brother Lu, Cloud Manor is the leader among all heroes of the lake and therefore your skills must be good. I wonder whether you would be willing to display a stance or two for me?"

Master Lu answered hurriedly, "Junior's skills are nothing compared to senior's, I'm afraid I'll embarrass myself. Furthermore, I have been crippled for a long time now and have given up the skills my teacher taught me long ago."

Qiu Qianren replied, "Who is your teacher? I may know him."

Master Lu let out a long sigh and his face paled. After a long while, he answered, "Junior is dumb and rough and is unable to serve my teacher. Due to the doings of others, my teacher disowned me. This is such a shameful story and I do not want my teacher's name to be smeared. I hope Senior understands."

Lu Guanying thought silently, "So father was disowned by his teacher and thus never displayed his skills. I didn't even know what a skilled fighter he is. If it weren't for that Jin dog that hurt me, father would never have displayed his skills. He must have experienced a very devastating and



hateful event in his life." Lu Guanying was deeply saddened and disturbed by this thought.

Qiu Qianren answered, "Brother is at the peak of his life and is the leader of a group of heroes. Why not take this opportunity to make your name known? It will help extinguish the wrongs done to you and make the seniors in your school regret them."

Master Lu replied, "Junior is crippled and is hopeless. Senior's advice is insightful but I cannot accept it."

Qiu Qianren answered, "Brother is too courteous. There is a pathway but I'm not sure whether brother will agree to take it."

Master Lu answered, "Then I shall bother Senior to help me out."

Qiu Qianren laughed softly but continued eating and did not answer. Master Lu knew that this man had hidden himself for twenty years and thought, "There must be some reason why he has resurfaced in Jianghu. Since he is a senior master, it is not proper for me to probe further and I can only wait for him to tell me."

Qiu Qianren spoke, "If brother does not want to display your skills, it's fine with me. Cloud Manor is a famous name and the leader must be from a famous school."

Master Lu gave a small laugh, "The matters of Cloud Manor have long been handled by my son Guanying. His teacher is the monk Kumo of Yun Qi Monastery."

Qiu Qianren answered, "Ah, Kumo is a skilled fighter of the Xian Xia sect which is affiliated to Shaolin. His skills are also commendable. How about the Junior Master displays some stances for me?"

Master Lu said, "It is the child's fortune to receive some pointers from Senior Qiu."

Lu Guanying thought it was rare to be able to meet such a highly skilled master and his advice would be insightful and precious. Therefore, he hoped to receive a few pointers. He immediately walked to the centre of the hall and said, "Elder, please give some pointers."

With that, he positioned himself and displayed his best stance, the 'Luo Han Subduing the Tiger' fists which created some wind when he punched with his fists. He was indeed the disciple of a skilled martial artist. His skills were unique and he displayed them for a while longer before releasing a loud roar which sounded like a tiger's roar; the candle lights wavered and a gust of wind blew to the four corners of the room. The servants felt a chilling sensation and were startled by his performance. Lu Guanying continued with a palm technique while shouting loudly, looking very impressive. He did a flip and crouched on the floor; then suddenly stretching his left palm out straight, displayed a stance of the 'Ru Lai Buddha Palm'. After a while longer, his roar grew softer but the pace of his 'Luo Han Fists' quickened and with his last stance, he attacked the floor and the force broke some bricks nearby. Lu Guanying flipped upright into position and with his left arm in the air and his right leg kicking out, he steadily and motionlessly formed the image of a Luo Han Buddha.

Guo Jing and Huang Rong cheered out loud and shouted, "Excellent palm technique!"

Lu Guanying relaxed, stood in normal position again, then turned to face Qiu Qianren who gave a slight smile.

Master Lu asked, "How are this child's set of palm techniques?"

Qiu Qianren answered, "Passable."

Master Lu said, "If it's far from perfect, I hope Senior gives some pointers."

Qiu Qianren replied, "Your son's palm techniques can be used to build up his body but is useless when fighting an opponent."

Master Lu answered, "I would like to hear Senior's comments so that he can improve them."

Guo Jing could not understand either and thought silently, "Junior Master's skills are not formidable, but how can the Elder say that they're useless?"

Qiu Qianren stood up and walked to the middle of the hall and returned to his seat with a two pieces of the bricks which Lu Guanying had broken earlier. He did something with his hand and a cracking sound was heard as the pieces broke into smaller pieces. He kneaded the pieces and they turned to powder, which floated off the table. Everyone was astonished by what they saw.

Qiu Qianren swept the dust and powder on the table onto his clothes and walked to the middle of the hall before shaking off the powder onto the floor. He laughed softly as he went back to his seat and said, "It is commendable for Junior Master to be able to break the bricks with a palm but think about this: The opponent is not a brick and will not stand there quietly, waiting for you to attack him or her. Furthermore, if the opponent's internal energy is stronger than yours and your palm strikes him or her and they repel the strike, you will be heavily injured yourself." Lu Guanying nodded silently.

Qiu Qianren sighed and continued, "There are many martial artists these days but only a few can be considered skilled

fighters.”

Huang Rong asked, “Which few?”

Qiu Qianren replied, “Wulin’s well-known five greats: Eastern Heretic, Western Poison, Southern Emperor, Northern Beggar and Central Divinity. However, Central Divinity Wang Chongyang has the most profound skills. As for the other four, they are skilled in their own way. But a person has strengths as well as weaknesses. If one knows their weakness, it is not difficult to defeat them.”

With those words, Qiu Qianren shocked Master Lu, Huang Rong and Guo Jing. Lu Guanying did not know of the five greats and did not know why the rest were surprised. Huang Rong was actually in awe of Qiu Qianren when she saw his display of skills, but when she heard his disrespect towards her father, she was furious and gave a polite laugh before asking, “So if Elder can defeat the five greats, wouldn’t that be incredible for you?”

Qiu Qianren answered, “Wang Chongyang has already passed away. I was caught up with some affairs at home during the Hua Shan tournament and could not attend it. That allowed that old Taoist to steal the title ‘number one’. At that time, the five were competing for the ‘Nine Yin Manual’, deciding that the most skilful fighter and winner would get the manual. They dueled for seven days and seven nights and Eastern Heretic, Western Poison, Northern Beggar and Southern Emperor lost. Later, when Wang Chongyang passed away, there was chaos again. I heard that the old Taoist passed the manual to his martial brother, Zhou Botong. Eastern Heretic, Huang Yaoshi rushed there and Zhou Botong was not his match, thereby allowing the former to steal half of the manual. No one knows what happened later.”

Huang Rong and Guo Jing thought silently, "So there were things which happened in between. Half of the manual was stolen by the 'Twin Killers of the Dark Winds'."

Huang Rong said, "Since Elder is the higher skilled, then the manual should belong to you!"

Qiu Qianren replied, "I cannot be bothered to fight for it. The four greats are mediocre and have been practicing all these years so as to compete for the number one title. It would be fun to see the second Hua Shan Tournament though."

Huang Rong asked, "There is a second Hua Shan Tournament?"

Qiu Qianren replied, "Once in every twenty-five years. If the old ones die, the young ones will take over. The next Hua Shan Tournament will take place in a year's time. But all these years have passed without any outstanding talents. I think it will be us old fellows once again. Ah, there are no outstanding descendants; the skills of the future generations will not be as great as the earlier ones." He shook his head as he spoke as though filled with deep regret.

Huang Rong asked, "Is Elder going to participate in the next Hua Shan Tournament? If yes, please take us alright? I love seeing people spar with each other."

Qiu Qianren grunted, "Ah, such childish talk! How can you call that sparring? Initially I didn't want to go. I am so old already, why bother about fighting for all these useless titles? However, I have a very important matter at hand, which involves the lives of everyone. I would be a selfish and greedy person if I do not step forward to help or the matter will turn into a catastrophe."

The four of them were astonished by his agitated tone and hurriedly asked him what was it.

Qiu Qianren answered, "This is a highly secretive matter. Since Brothers Guo and Huang are not Jianghu people, its better that you don't hear about it."

Huang Rong laughed, "Master Lu is my good friend; if you tell it to him then he will tell it to me." Master Lu secretly scolded Huang Rong for being so cheeky but did not deny her words.

Qiu Qianren replied, "Since this is so, I will tell all of you then. But before the matter is resolved, I would like all of you to keep it a secret."

Guo Jing thought, "We are not related to him in anyway and since it's a secretive issue, it's better not to hear it." With that, he stood up and announced, "Both us juniors bid our farewell."

He pulled Huang Rong's hand and was about to leave when Qiu Qianren replied, "Since both of you are Master Lu's good friends, you are not outsiders. Please sit," With that, he tapped Guo Jing on the shoulder. Guo Jing did not find his energy spectacular but obeyed and returned to his seat.

Qiu Qianren stood up and toasted the wine to the four people before saying, "Not more than half a year from now, Great Song will be in trouble. Does anyone know why?" The others were stunned by his serious expression. Lu Guanying waved to signal to the servants to leave the room and ordered them not to bring in any more food.

Qiu Qianren continued, "I have gotten news that in six months time, the Jin will attack the south with a formidable army and our Song Empire will be lost. Hai, this is so sudden that we cannot do much about it."

Guo Jing was alarmed and asked, "Then Elder Qiu had better go and inform the Imperial Court and ask them to prepare and make plans to counter the enemy."

Qiu Qianren stared at him and scolded, "What does a young man like you know? If Great Song is prepared, they will lose out even more." No one understood what he was saying and looked at him with alarm.

He continued, "I have wracked my brain for a plan to protect the safety and happiness of the people and there is only one way to protect the country. I have traveled all the way to Jiangnan for this. I heard that the Little Jin Prince and Commander Duan are held in this manor. Why not invite them in for a discussion?"

Master Lu did not know how Qiu Qianren knew of this but hurriedly ordered two servants to bring them in. He ordered their chains removed but asked the servants to place them on the floor and denied them any utensils for dinning. Guo Jing and Huang Rong noticed that Wanyan Kang looked weak and exhausted. Commander Duan looked like he was in his early fifties, had a thick beard and wore a frightened expression.

Qiu Qianren looked at Wanyan Kang and said, "Little Prince has suffered?"

Wanyan Kang nodded and thought, "I wonder why Guo Jing and Huang Rong are here?" The day he fought in Master Lu's study, he didn't notice them hiding in one corner. The three looked at, but did not greet each other.

Qiu Qianren faced Master Lu and said, "There is much wealth in front of your manor but why hasn't brother retrieved it?"

Master Lu was curious and asked, "I live a simple, rural life. What wealth is Elder talking about?"

Qiu Qianren answered, "When the Jin Army attacks the South, a great war will start and many lives will be lost. If brother gathers the heroes of Jiangnan and you fight together, you will banish the Jin and attain peace."

Master Lu thought silently, "This is a serious matter indeed." He answered hurriedly, "It is my honor to help fight for my country and it is something that I am responsible for. I am loyal to my country but the Imperial Court does not appreciate it. If a person is evil, even if he becomes a priest, it is useless if he does not have the right morals. I hope Senior creates a pathway for me and Junior to follow and we will be more than grateful. I do not crave any wealth or rewards."

Qiu Qianren stroked his beard and laughed. He was about to answer when the housekeeper rushed forward and said, "Leader Zhang has spotted six suspicious-looking people on the lake. They have already reached the Manor."

Master Lu paled and called out, "Invite them in quickly."

He thought silently, "Why are there six people? Could it be that the 'Twin Killers of the Dark Winds' have found allies?"



# Chapter 14 - The Master of Peach Blossom Island

Translated by Frans Soetomo



*The power of the 'Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms' was not light. However, Mei Chaofeng always knew in advance where his attack would go and was able to evade quickly. Several moves later the strange man flicked three pebbles in succession. Mei Chaofeng followed the sound and launched three deadly attacks one after another.*

What he saw was six people, five men and one woman, entering the hall. They were the Six Freaks of Jiangnan. They had been wandering around the north and south and on this particular day had arrived at Lake Tai, where they met some Jianghu people on a boat who received them attentively.

They had been away from their hometown for such a long time that they did not know the current affairs of the martial arts world. They weren't sure who these people were, so Zhu Cong exchanged some pleasantries with them. It turned out these people were Manager Zhang [zhai zhu] and his men from 'Cloud Manor' [gui yun zhuang].

They had received orders from Lu Guanying to guard the lake and to report any unusual activities. They did not know who these six people were, and since these six wielded weapons, they were inclined to regard the six as the enemies of the Old Manor Master. Therefore, Manager Zhang acted with utmost prudence and received the six cordially then invited them to enter the manor while at the same time sending a report to the Manor Master.

Guo Jing, however, was ecstatic to see his six masters. Quickly he knelt and greeted them one by one, "First Master, Second Master, Third Master, Fourth Master, Sixth Master, and Seventh Master! You are all here! This truly is wonderful!" He was overly exuberant, but because of his

spontaneity everyone could see his sincerity and genuine delight.

Although the Six Freaks were angry with him over the Huang Rong affair, in all honesty they loved him dearly. They were pleasantly surprised to see him and all anger simply vanished into thin air.

“Child, where is that female demon of yours?” Han Baoju could not help scolding him.

Han Xiaoying, however, had a pair of sharp eyes. She saw Huang Rong wearing men’s clothing sitting amongst the group. She tugged Han Baoju’s sleeve and whispered, “Calm down. We will talk this over later.”

Initially Master Lu also suspected that his enemies had arrived, but then he saw that these six were total strangers to him. Moreover, Guo Jing had addressed them as his masters. He was relieved. Cupping his fists in respect he apologized, “I have crippled legs; please forgive me for not standing up to welcome you,” and immediately gave the order to prepare another banquet table for the guests.

Without wasting another second Guo Jing introduced his Masters. Master Lu was delighted and said, “I have heard of your illustrious names and admired you for a long time. It is very fortunate to finally meet you in person today.” His manner was very cordial.

Qiu Qianren, on the other hand, did not show any interest in the six guests. He simply smiled faintly and kept eating and drinking.

Han Baoju was irritated and could not hold his temper. “And who is this gentleman?” he asked.

"I am pleased to introduce him to you, Six Masters," Master Lu proudly said. "He is the highly respected Senior of Wulin, the Taishan (Mount Tai) and the Big Dipper Constellation [meaning – the ultimate] of this present age."

The Six Freaks were startled. "Is he the Peach Blossom Island Master Huang Yaoshi?" asked Han Xiaoying. "Could he be the 'Nine-Fingered Divine Beggar' [jiu zhi shen gai] Hong Qigong?" asked Han Baoju.

Master Lu smiled and explained, "No, he is neither. He is the 'Iron Palm Floating on the Water' [tie zhang shui shang piao], Senior Qiu."

"He is Senior Qiu Qianren?" Ke Zhen'E asked, surprised by the revelation.

Qiu Qianren laughed heartily with a smug face

By that time the manor staff had finished preparing a new banquet table and the Six Freaks took their seats. Guo Jing wanted to sit with his masters. He tugged Huang Rong's hand for them to go together, but Huang Rong simply smiled and shook her head. She was not willing to sit with the Six Freaks.

Master Lu laughed and said, "I thought Brother Guo did not know martial arts. Who would have known that you are the disciple of these well-known Masters? Truly my eyes are blind and could not see the hidden treasure right in front of me ..."

Guo Jing stood up. "My skill is mediocre," he said, "I was indeed taught by these Masters. I do not dare to show off in front of the Manor Master. I beg your forgiveness."

Ke Zhen'E was delighted listening to their conversation. He was proud that Guo Jing was well-behaved.

Qiu Qianren suddenly said, "The Six Freaks of the South [Jiangnan] are prominent characters in the Jianghu world. This old man has a very important matter to deal with. It would be wonderful if I could acquire your valuable assistance."

"Senior Qiu was just about to explain the matter when the six guests arrived," explained the Manor Master. "Now would Senior please enlighten us?"

Qiu Qianren complied and said, "For we who live in the Jianghu world, the ultimate purpose of our existence is chivalry and helping the suffering people. Right now we see with our own eyes the Jin army moving south. If our Song Dynasty cannot discern good from bad and is not willing to surrender, when the war breaks out, I wonder how many lives will perish? As the saying goes, 'shun tian zhe chang, ni tian zhe wang' [following Heaven's will means prosperity, opposing Heaven's will means death]. Therefore, this old man is going to make contact with the valiant people of the south and to take up arms alongside the Jin army and attack the Song Dynasty from both sides. This will render it helpless and thus it will not have any choice but surrender. If we succeed, not only will we gain riches and honor, but the gratitude of the common people as well. That way our martial arts skills are not useless and we do not taint the two characters 'xia yi' (chivalry) with dishonor."

Hearing this, the Six Freaks' countenances flushed and the Han siblings were ready to open their mouths. Luckily Quan Jinfa - who sat between them, quickly pulled their sleeves and signaled with his eyes towards the Manor Master, hinting that they should wait to see how he responded.

So far Master Lu had showed great admiration for Qiu Qianren; but listening to his speech he was unable to restrain his great surprise. He forced a smile and said,

“Even though Junior is unworthy and my body is as worthless as grass, I have never dared to forget ‘zhong yi’ [loyalty and brotherhood]. The Jin army is going south to attack my country and they mean harm to the people. Junior will certainly join other Jiangnan heroes to fight the invaders to my death. Senior, what you just said, was that to test me?”

“Brother Lu, how can you be so short sighted?” Qiu Qianren asked. “What good is it to help the Song fight the Jin? Most likely you will end up like Yue Wu Mu [General Yue Fei], who suffered a tragic death at the ‘Crisis Pavilion’ [Feng Bo Ting].”

Hearing this, Master Lu was shocked and angered at the same time. Initially he thought he could count on Qiu to help him deal with the ‘Twin Killers of the Dark Winds’ [hei feng shuang sha]. Who would have thought that he had decided to betray his own country? It was useless to possess a high martial arts skill if the person had such a low character and was this shameless. He flicked his sleeve and said, “Junior is facing a formidable enemy tonight. I was going to ask Senior to help me uphold justice; but since we do not hold to the same values, I do not dare to entertain your honorable presence even if blood should splash from my neck. Please!” He cupped his fists. His intention was clear; he did not want the guest to stay any longer.

The Six Freaks of Jiangnan – along with Guo Jing and Huang Rong, were delighted and secretly admired their host.

Qiu Qianren smiled but did not say anything. As his left hand gripped the wine cup, his right hand moved towards the cup’s mouth, revolving the cup around in his hand. Suddenly he flipped his right hand and flicked the cup away. To everyone’s amazement the cup was cut smoothly into

two parts: the cup bottom and about half an inch of porcelain ring. To crush a cup is not difficult, but to cut the cup smoothly was a demonstration of profound energy worthy of respect.

Master Lu realized he was being threatened. While he was still hesitating, the 'Horse God' [ma wang shen] Han Baoju had already leaped out of his seat. Angrily he called out, "Shameless scoundrel, let us see who is superior, you or I!"

Qiu Qianren did not falter. "I have heard for a long time of the Seven Freaks of Jiangnan's stellar reputation. Today I want to see whether what I heard is true or not. All six of you, come!"

Master Lu knew Han Baoju was no match for the old man. He was delighted to hear the old man challenge all six of them. He quickly said, "The Six Freaks of Jiangnan always move forward and backward together. Facing a single enemy or fighting an army, the six go together, not a single one of them willing to be left behind."

Zhu Cong understood very well the Manor Master's intention. "Very well," he said, "let us five brothers and our sister fight this famous Wulin character!" He waved his hand and his five brothers and sister immediately left their seats.

Qiu Qianren also stood up, picked his chair up, strolled to the center of the hall, set the chair down, and sat with his right foot above his left. He calmly said, "This old man will fight you sitting down."

Ke Zhen'E and the others were startled. He knew that the old man would not dare to act so arrogantly if he did not have a very high level of martial arts.

While his six masters had not made any moves yet, Guo Jing quickly moved forward. He had heard amazing stories

about this old man's kungfu and knew his masters were not this old man's match. He had received his masters' kindness and even though he knew the risk, he stepped in front of his masters and boldly said, "Junior is asking for some lessons from the Senior."

Qiu Qianren was surprised; then exploded in laughter. "It wasn't easy for your parents to raise you. Why would you waste your unworthy life for nothing in this place?"

Almost in unison Ke Zhen'E and the others called out, "Jing'er, move back!"

But Guo Jing was determined. He was afraid his masters would hold him back, so without saying anything he bent his left leg a little bit, moved his right palm in a circular motion, then thrust it forward, hard. It was the 'The Proud Dragon Shows Remorse' [kang long you hui] from the 'Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms', which he had unceasingly trained hard up to this day. It could not be compared to what it was when Hong Qigong first taught it to him.

Qiu Qianren had judged Han Baoju's skill when he leaped out of his seat. It wasn't extraordinary so it was natural that he thought Han's disciple would not be good either. It was beyond his comprehension that Guo Jing's attack would be so fierce. He was shocked and hastily leaped up from his chair, only to hear a loud cracking sound. His chair had been destroyed by Guo Jing's palm.

"Confounded kid!" he shouted angrily when he landed back on the floor.

Guo Jing was a bit wary; he did not dare to advance. "Senior, please give me some pointers," he said politely.

Huang Rong wanted to disturb Qiu Qianren's mind so she called out, "Jing ge ge, don't be so polite to this old



scoundrel!”

The old man was livid! As long as he had roamed Jianghu, who would dare call him ‘old scoundrel’ to his face? He was about to thrust his palm to attack her, but suddenly remembered his own reputation. He sneered and lifted his right hand and positioned his left hand on his eyebrows. Then, just when Guo Jing darted sideways to fend, redirected his hand to make a claw then retracted it. The hand on his eyebrows moved forward in circular motion. His right hand followed, changing from a fist to a palm.

Huang Rong called out, “What’s so special about that move? That is the ‘Lone Goose Leaves the Flock’ [gu yan chu qun] from the ‘Open Arm Six Palms Technique’ [tong bi liu he zhang]!”

Qiu Qianren was surprised that she recognized his move. It was indeed the ‘Open Arm Six Palms Technique’, which was created based on the ‘Open Arm Five Elements Technique’ [tong bi wu xing zhang]. It was not an extraordinary move, but he had perfected this move for decades. The word ‘open’ here actually meant that his right and left arms were interchangeable. Guo Jing saw his right hand coming fast, while his left hand moving to the right, then the right hand went back and supported the left hand. Both hands were supporting each other, increasing the strength of both hands and was very fierce.

Guo Jing had seen his amazing strength and he lacked experience in combat. He was a little bit nervous and did not dare to counterattack. He kept stepping back.

Qiu Qianren thought, “This kid could destroy a chair because of his strength, but actually his martial arts are only average.” He immediately launched several stances: ‘Penetrating Palm Hacking Down in a Flash’ [chuan zhang

shan pi], 'Lifting the Cloud Palm Technique' [liao yin zhang], 'Step Across the Tiger to Climb a Mountain' [kua hu deng shan], getting stronger with each stance.

Huang Rong was anxious seeing that Guo Jing was losing. She approached the two with the intention of stepping in if Guo Jing was in danger.

When Guo Jing saw her coming, he turned his head to see her anxious face and could not help but feel nervous. Qiu Qianren saw this and, wasting no time, he attacked with the 'White Snake Spitting Sign' [bai she tu zhi]; his palm hit Guo Jing squarely on the chest.

Huang Rong and the Six Freaks – as well as Master Lu and his son, all called out in alarm. They thought that with Qiu's strength hitting such a vital part, Guo Jing must be dead or at least severely injured.

Guo Jing was also shocked, so he immediately circulated his chi and lifted both arms. Strangely he did not feel too much pain, which puzzled him no end. Huang Rong saw him staring blankly and thought that he was internally injured and was about to pass out. She immediately jumped forward to support him and asked anxiously, "Jing ge ge, are you all right?" Her heart was so shaken that tears flowed involuntarily from her eyes.

Guo Jing's response was unexpected, "I am all right! Let me try again." He stuck his chest out, walked toward Qiu Qianren and boldly said, "You are the senior 'Iron Palm Who Floats on Water', hit me again!"

Qiu Qianren was furious; he immediately struck another palm at Guo Jing's chest with all his strength. But instead of collapsing, Guo Jing laughed loudly and shouted, "Masters! Rong'er! This old scoundrel's skill is only ordinary. As long as he did not hit me, his secret was safe; but as soon as he

hit me, his secret is revealed!" His words were followed by a sweep of his left arm, forcing Qiu Qianren to step back. "Now you can feel my palm!" he shouted.

Qiu Qianren saw his movement and thought, "You said 'palm' but your hand forms a fist, do you think I am blind?" He underestimated Guo Jing's attack and simply blocked the fist with both hands in front of his chest. Who would have known that Guo Jing was using the 'Dragon Battling in the Wilderness' [long zhan yu ye] which was the most mysterious stance of the 'Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms'. Both left and right arms could be either solid or void without any specific rules.

Qiu Qianren saw Guo Jing's left arm move while his right arm hung loose; suddenly the right arm thrust forward and hit Qiu Qianren on the right shoulder, followed by a punch to his chest. Qiu Qianren's body flew out of the hall through the main entrance like a kite with broken string!

Just as everyone uttered a startled cry, somebody suddenly appeared in the entrance. She held Qiu Qianren by his collar while entering the main hall with big strides. She put Qiu Qianren down on the floor and stood coolly at the center of the hall. Her face was cold and expressionless and her long hair lay scattered about her shoulders. She looked up. It was none other than 'Iron Corpse', Mei Chaofeng. Every heart skipped a beat.

Behind her was another person no less peculiar than 'Iron Corpse'. That person was tall and rather thin and wearing a dark green robe. His countenance was pale and expressionless. Other than his eyes, the rest of his face seemed frozen like a wooden statue. He stood still and stiff like a standing corpse. As soon as everyone saw this person, a chill crept down their spines. They immediately turned

their gaze away from this person, not daring to look at his face any longer with their hearts thumping.

Master Lu was perplexed. He would never have thought that the world famous Qiu Qianren would collapse unexpectedly from the first blow of his opponent. He was about to smile but, seeing Mei Chaofeng's arrival, his smile froze.

Wanyan Kang saw his master and was very excited. He immediately stepped forward to pay his respects. Everybody could see that these two, master and disciple, were actually similar in appearance and could not help but be astonished.

Master Lu raised his cupped fists and said, "Martial Sister Mei, it's been twenty long years and we finally meet here. How is Martial Brother Chen?"

The Six Freaks exchanged glances with Guo Jing. They clearly heard Master Lu calling her 'Martial Sister' and could not help but feel dismayed. Ke Zhen'E was upset. "We fall into a trap today," he said. "Mei Chaofeng alone is not easy to deal with, now she has her martial brother at hand."

Huang Rong on the other hand secretly nodded her head. "This Master's martial arts and literary knowledge, as well as his general conduct and manner of speaking, resemble those of my father. I suspected he must have a martial relationship with us. But who would have thought he's my father's disciple."

Mei Chaofeng replied coldly, "Is the speaker my martial brother Lu Chengfeng?"

"Yes," Master Lu answered. "Has Martial Sister been well since our last meeting?"

“Why do you ask?” Mei Chaofeng answered. “Both of my eyes are blind. Can’t you see it? Your Martial Brother Xuanfeng was murdered a long time ago. That was your expectation, was it not?”

Master Lu was both pleasantly surprised and shocked. The ‘Twin Killers of the Dark Winds’ had roamed Jianghu and turned it upside-down...how could ‘Copper Corpse’ have been murdered? But he was also relieved because he had one less formidable enemy and moreover, the one left behind was blind. However, he recalled their apprenticeship together on Peach Blossom Island and could not help but feel sad. “Who killed Martial Brother Chen?” he sighed and asked. “Has Martial Sister sought revenge?”

“I have wandered everywhere looking for them,” Mei Chaofeng answered.

“Let Little Brother help you,” Master Lu said. “Afterward we can sort out our own business.”

“Humph!” Mei Chaofeng sneered.

“Mei Chaofeng!” Han Baoju could not hold himself. He slapped the table and shouted, “Your sworn enemies are here!”

He was going to pounce on her, but Quan Jinfa quickly pulled him back. Mei Chaofeng, on the other hand, was taken aback. “You ... you ...” she stammered.

At that time Qiu Qianren, who had been silent because of the chest pain from Guo Jing’s punch, felt the pain subsiding. He opened his mouth to say, “What is it you were talking about...revenge? Why, your own master was killed and you don’t know it? What kind of hero are you?”

“What did you say?” Mei Chaofeng almost screamed. She tightly crushed Qiu Qianren’s hand so that he cried out in pain, “Let go...let go!”

Mei Chaofeng ignored him, “What did you say?” she repeated.

“The Master of Peach Blossom Island has been killed!” Qiu Qianren answered.

Lu Chengfeng was stunned. “Is that true?” he asked anxiously.

“Why would it not be true?” Qiu Qianren answered. “He was surrounded and killed by the Quanzhen Seven Masters, Wang Chongyang’s disciples.”

Before he finished speaking Mei Chaofeng and Lu Chengfeng had called out loudly. With a loud thud Huang Rong fell backwards from her chair...unconscious. The others initially did not believe that with his expertise, Huang Yaoshi would easily be killed by anyone; but since it was the Quanzhen Seven Masters, they had to believe it. They knew very well the combined power of Ma Yu, Qiu Chuji, Wang Chuyi and the others would be difficult for Huang Yaoshi to defeat.

Guo Jing, frantic, hugged Huang Rong and called out, “Rong’er, wake up!” He saw Huang Rong’s face was deathly pale and her breathing uneven; he was even more anxious and called his masters, “Master...Master...help!”

Zhu Cong immediately came over and held his hand beneath her nose. “Don’t worry,” he said. “She was only shocked...she is not going to die.” Then he rubbed her ‘Fatigue Palace acupoint’ [lao gong xue] while slowly transferring internal energy.

Huang Rong slowly recovered. "Father...Father! I want my Father!" she cried.

Lu Chengfeng was surprised, but immediately realized, "She is Master's daughter. No wonder she knew about the 'Nine Flower Jade Dew Pill'." He shed some tears and loudly called out, "Little Martial Sister, let us go after those scoundrel Quanzhen priests to seek revenge. Mei Chaofeng...are you coming or not? If you don't come, let me fight you to the death right now! It ... it was because of you that Master met his fate."

Lu Guanying knew his father was too deep in sorrow to speak coherently. He quickly supported him and urged, "Father, please don't be so sad. We need to consider it further."

Lu Chengfeng ignored his son and cried louder. "Mei Chaofeng! You bitch! You have caused me much harm! You are shameless! You ran away with your man, which was all right with me, but why did you have to steal Master's 'Nine Yin Manual' as well? In his anger he smashed the ligaments in the legs of us four martial brothers. Not only that, he expelled us from Peach Blossom Island. I was hoping Master would change his mind and have compassion on us who hadn't done anything to deserve such punishment. Now that he's passed away, my hope is shattered ..."

"I always thought you were spineless," Mei Chaofeng scolded, "and you are still spineless. Three...four times you lead other people to deal with us, forcing us - husband and wife to be without shelter; we had to run for our lives and ended up suffering on the Mongolian Steppe. Now you don't have guts enough to seek revenge for our Master, but keep nagging about settling your own old debts with me. I say we go and find those seven scoundrels and deal with them. If you can't walk, I'll carry you!"

All this time Huang Rong was still weeping, "Father! I want my Father!"

Zhu Cong intervened, "Let us ask about this more directly," he said, walking towards Qiu Qianren. He brushed some dust from Qiu Qianren's clothes and apologetically said, "My young disciple was ignorant and has offended you; he has no regard for seniority."

Qiu Qianren was angry, "I am old, my eyes are not clear, I let it slip by. Come, let us fight again!"

Zhu Cong patted his shoulder and pulled his left hand gently, then persuasively smiled, "Senior is an expert; there is no need to fight with him." As soon as they got to the table, Zhu Cong picked a wine cup up with his left hand, while his right hand covered the cup's mouth. Then he revolved it around, just like Qiu had done, and flicked the cup to the table. With a clanking sound the wine cup landed on the table, broken into two parts: the cup bottom and about half an inch of porcelain ring. Exactly like Qiu Qianren demonstrated earlier. Everyone was amazed!

Zhu Cong smiled and said, "Senior's skill is extraordinary. Junior has stolen it from you. Please forgive my offense and many thanks to you."

Qiu Qianren's face changed color immediately. Now everybody knew there must be some kind of trick, but nobody really knew what was going on.

"Jing'er, come here!" Zhu Cong called, "Let me teach you a trick and later on you can use it to deceive other people."

Guo Jing came near and Zhu Cong showed him a ring on his left middle finger. "This is Senior Qiu's; I borrowed it from him a moment ago. Go ahead and put it on," he said while taking the ring off his own finger.



Qiu Qianren was startled, then fuming mad. He did not understand how the ring on his finger had moved to Zhu's finger. In the meantime Guo Jing had already taken the ring. Zhu Cong explained, "This ring has a diamond chip on it, the hardest material on earth. Put the diamond's tip on the wine cup and rotate the cup with your right hand."

Guo Jing did so. Now Lu Guanying and the others began to understand. They were unable to restrain a smile and softly murmured amongst themselves. Guo Jing turned the cup in his right hand and sure enough, the cup was smoothly broken into two parts. If one looked carefully, the diamond had left a deep mark on the porcelain pieces; it wasn't profound internal energy at all.

Huang Rong was amused and she was smiling through her tears; then the memory of her father came flooding back and she cried again.

"Don't cry, Miss," Zhu Cong comforted her, "This Senior Qiu loves to deceive people and his words may not be necessarily true." Huang Rong was puzzled and she looked at him with a questioning look.

"Your father's martial arts are so profound; how could he be killed by other people easily?" Zhu Cong said with a smile. "Also, the Quanzhen Seven Masters are respectable people and they have no enmity towards your father. Why would they kill him without a reason?"

"Perhaps it was because of Qiu Chuji and the other ox-noses [derogatory term for Taoist priests] Martial Uncle Zhou Botong," Huang Rong said, expressing a guess.

"What about him?" Zhu Cong asked.

"You wouldn't know about it," Huang Rong said, crying again. Even with her intelligence, she was not really sure

what really happened. First of all, it had something to do with her mother and Huang Yaoshi did not want to talk too much about it. Second, the business between her father and Zhou Botong was more complicated than her young mind could grasp. She did not want to believe the Quanzhen Seven Masters would attack her father, but the fact was....she was not sure.

"Whatever it was, I'd say this old man's word is a little bit smelly," Zhu Cong said.

"You mean he was only ... only ...," Huang Rong stuttered.

"Yes, he was just farting!" Zhu Cong laughed. "He has so many tricks stored in his pocket and guess what he would do with them." Then he groped into his pocket and produced some things which he placed on the table. Among those things were two bricks, some dry grass, a piece of cloth to light a fire, a knife for the same purpose and a piece of flint.

Huang Rong took a brick and as soon as she tightened her grip she could feel the brick was soft. She gripped it harder and, without too much effort, the brick crumbled into powder. After listening to Zhu Cong's words her sadness was greatly reduced. Her face broke into a smile, showing her two dimples. "This brick is made from bread flour. He used it to demonstrate his profound internal energy earlier."

Qiu Qianren's face turned from pale to red and back to pale. He was greatly ashamed. He thought that with the news of Huang Yaoshi's death, everyone's attention could be diverted and he would find an opportunity to escape. Who would have thought that his scheme would be revealed by Zhu Cong? He flicked his sleeve and turned around to

walk out. But Mei Chaofeng reached backwards, snatched him, and then threw him on the floor.

“You said my Master passed away, did you tell the truth?” she asked menacingly. Qiu Qianren was in too much pain to say anything, he only whimpered.

Huang Rong noticed that the grass was half burnt and immediately realized what had happened earlier. “Second Master, light the grass, put it inside your sleeve, then inhale and exhale.”

The Six Freaks of Jiangnan initially had some problems with Huang Rong, but Qiu Qianren’s trickery had united them in facing a common enemy. Zhu Cong happily complied. Actually he liked Huang Rong’s cunning mind and her eccentricity. Now that Huang Rong called him ‘Second Master’ he liked her even more. He did what was asked and while doing that, he even closed his eyes and swayed his head solemnly.

Huang Rong clapped her hands in delight. “Jing ge ge,” she said laughing happily, “Didn’t we see this old man practicing his internal strength a while ago exactly like this?” She walked to Qiu Qianren’s side and said, “Stand up!” As she pulled him up, she suddenly struck his ‘Holy Way’ [shen dao] acupoint under the fifth rib on his back with her left hand, using the ‘Orchid’ acupoint sealing technique [lan hua fu xue shou]. She shouted loudly, “Tell me, did my father die? If you say he did, I will take your life away!” With a flip of her hand she placed a shiny butterfly shaped steel piece on his chest.

Everybody was amused hearing her threat. She asked him for the truth but she didn’t want him to say Huang Yaoshi was dead.

Qiu Qianren was writhing in pain and also suffering from an itch. "I am afraid he is not dead yet. I don't know ..." he said, trembling.

Huang Rong beamed from ear to ear. "Very good!" she said, "I will spare you." She struck his 'Open Basin' [que pen] acupoint to ease his suffering.

Lu Chengfeng thought, "Little Martial Sister's question was one-sided and really missed the point." So he asked, "You said my Master had been killed by the Quanzhen Seven Masters, did you see it with your own eyes, or did you just hear it from somebody else?"

"I heard it from somebody else," Qiu Qianren replied.

"Who was it?" Lu Chengfeng pursued.

Qiu Qianren hesitated, but finally said, "It was Hong Qigong."

"When did he tell you that?" asked Huang Rong.

"About a month ago," Qiu Qianren answered.

"Where did you two meet?" Huang Rong asked again.

"At the summit of Mount Tai [Taishan]," Qiu Qianren answered. "We were having a match and he lost to me. He unintentionally mentioned it."

Huang Rong was ecstatic. She hopped around like a little kid. Her left hand grabbed his chest, her right hand pulled away some of his beard. Giggling she said, "Hong Qigong lost to this old scoundrel? Martial Sister Mei, Martial Brother Lu, don't listen to him, he was just ... just ..." Being a girl, she didn't have the heart to use vulgar language.

Zhu Cong continued for her, "He was just farting!" then he covered his mouth, laughing.

Huang Rong continued, "A month ago Hong Qigong was with Jing ge ge and I. Jing ge ge, give him another blow!"

"Right!" Guo Jing said, moving towards Qiu Qianren.

Qiu Qianren was frightened and he turned around to escape, but Mei Chaofeng was standing in the middle of the doorway. He turned around again, but this time Lu Guanying blocked his way. He quickly pushed until Guanying staggered and fell. Even though he had gained his fame by deceiving people, Qiu Qianren still possessed some real martial arts skill. If he did not, he would not recklessly dare to challenge the Six Freaks and Guo Jing. Lu Guanying was certainly not his match.

Huang Rong jumped to block him. "You carried an iron cauldron over your head and walked on water, how did you do it?" she asked.

"That was my special skill," Qiu Qianren answered. "My title is 'Iron Palm Floating on Water'; that was the 'Floating on Water'."

"You are still boasting," Huang Rong said with a smile. "Aren't you going to tell me the truth?"

"I am old, my martial arts are not as they used to be," Qiu Qianren answered. "But my lightness kungfu has been trained to perfection."

"Very well," Huang Rong said, "There is a large cistern containing gold fish outside in the courtyard. Why don't you demonstrate your 'Floating on Water' so that everybody can see your skill? Just go out of the hall, turn left beneath the

sweet-smelling 'osmanthus' [gui hua] tree." [Note: A fragrant evergreen tree/shrub native to China.]

"How can someone train in a cistern ...?" Qiu Qianren had not finished speaking when something flashed brightly in front of his eyes and, without him realizing it, his foot had been grabbed and he was hanging upside down.

"Your death is imminent, yet you still open your big mouth!" Mei Chaofeng shouted. Her 'Poisonous Silver Dragon Whip' [du long yin bian] curled in midair and hurled him toward the cistern, following Huang Rong's directions.

Huang Rong quickly moved to the cistern, waving her butterfly shaped steel piece menacingly. "I won't let you out of the cistern unless you explain to me your 'Floating on Water'!"

Qiu Qianren kicked the cistern's bottom, trying to leap up, but Huang Rong's steel punctured his shoulder. He fell back into the cistern, soaking wet. With face showing much pain he said, "In that cauldron was laid a thin sheet of iron which was sealed; above it I put three inches of water. In that creek I hid some wooden poles about five to six inches below the surface to make them invisible."

Huang Rong laughed, then re-entered the hall, not paying Qiu Qianren any more attention. He quickly leaped up from the cistern and hastily ran out of the manor without looking back.

Mei Chaofeng and Lu Chengfeng smiled in embarrassment. They had fought and cried over nothing. Their master had not been killed. Now that this matter was made clear, they felt uneasy towards each other. Mei Chaofeng hesitated for a moment, then clearing her throat she said, "Lu Chengfeng, let my disciple go. For the sake of our Master I won't remember our past differences any longer. As for the

fact that both husband and wife had to flee to Mongolia ... oh well, that was our fate."

Lu Chengfeng heaved a deep sigh. He said in his heart, "Her husband has died, her eyes blinded and she is alone and forsaken in this world. Both my legs are crippled, but I have a wife and a son. I have a family and I have a business. Actually my condition is a hundred times better than hers. Both of us are decades older than we were then, why would I keep holding resentment towards her?" Therefore, he answered, "You can take your disciple away. Mei Shijie [older martial sister], your younger brother will leave for Peach Blossom Island to visit our benevolent master tomorrow. Will you come with me?"

"Do you dare?" Mei Chaofeng asked with a trembling voice.

"To visit Peach Blossom Island without Master's permission is a big violation of our banishment, but after listening to that old man Qiu talking nonsense, my heart was troubled. I want to make sure he is all right. If I don't go, I will be haunted with uncertainty for the rest of my life."

Before Mei Chaofeng could answer Huang Rong had already said, "Let us all go together. I will ask his forgiveness on your behalf."

Mei Chaofeng was silent for a moment. Two lines of tears flowed down her cheeks. "I don't have face to see him," she sadly said. "Our benevolent master had compassion on a wretched child like me. He took me as his disciple and raised me. But because of wild ambition I have betrayed him..." Suddenly she lifted her head and shouted, "I only want to seek revenge for my husband. Afterwards, I know what to do. Seven Freaks of Jiangnan...let us sort out our business now. Martial Brother Lu, Little Martial Sister, you stand aside; don't even think of interfering. No matter who

lives or who dies, I don't want you to help either side. Do you hear?"

Ke Zhen'E walked in big strides to the main hall, his iron staff striking the brick floor. Then he said clearly with his hoarse voice, "Mei Chaofeng, you can't see me, neither can I see you. That night when we fought on that barren hill, your husband died a violent death, but our fifth brother also died at your hands. Did you know that?"

"Oh...there's only six of you left?" Mei Chaofeng asked.

"We promised Taoist Priest Ma Yu to no longer seek vengeance towards you, but it is actually you that looked for us. Good! Even though the world is wide, we always meet each other. It seems like the heavens won't allow the six of us to co-exist with you in this world. Come!" Ke Zhen'E coldly said.

Mei Chaofeng snorted. "The six of you can attack together," she said icily.

Zhu Cong and the other Freaks quickly arranged themselves near their elder brother, guarding against Mei Chaofeng's sudden attack. Everybody unsheathed their weapons.

Suddenly Guo Jing moved forward. "Let your disciple fight her first," he said.

Lu Chengfeng was in an awkward situation. He heard Mei Chaofeng's challenge and the six accepted. He did not know how to be the mediator and he hated himself for not having authority or influence over these people. But hearing Guo Jing's words an idea suddenly came to his mind. He quickly said, "Both sides please stay your hands for a moment. Please listen to Little Brother's words. Although Mei Shijie and the Jiangnan Six have deep enmity between you, each



side has suffered an unfortunate loss. In Little Brother's opinion, no more blood needs to be shed. Let today's match only decide victory or defeat, please don't deepen the enmity. The Six Freaks, although they always face the enemy together, it is still six against one; that, in my opinion, is not fair. Why doesn't Mei Shijie teach several moves to young Brother Guo?"

Mei Chaofeng snorted and coldly said, "How could I fight an unknown junior?"

"Your husband died at my hands. What does it have to do with my Masters?" Guo Jing called out.

Mei Chaofeng was furious. She jumped up and shouted, "Precisely! I will kill you first, little scoundrel!" By listening to voices she knew her enemy's position. Her five fingers stretched towards Guo Jing's skull.

Guo Jing leaped to avoid the attack. "Senior Mei!" he called out. "I was very young and ignorant and I accidentally killed your husband. But one has to be responsible for one's actions. Today you want to kill me and I won't run away. But will you still look for my Masters in the future?" He realized he was no match for Mei Chaofeng and was ready to die under her fingers; but he was determined to protect his Masters in any way he could.

"You really aren't going to run away?" Mei Chaofeng asked.

"No!" Guo Jing asserted.

"Good!" Mei Chaofeng shouted. "I am willing to write off the Six Freaks' debt. Good boy, come, follow me!"

"Mei Shijie, he is a real man. You on the other hand, will be the laughingstock of the heroes of Jianghu!" Huang Rong suddenly called out.

“How?” Mei Chaofeng was angry.

“He is the only heir to the Jiangnan’s Six Freaks’ skills,” Huang Rong explained. “The Six Freaks martial arts of today cannot be compared to theirs of the past. It would be quite easy if they really wanted to take your life. But they have actually forgiven you. Not only that, they also gave you face. It was you who didn’t know the good from the bad... yet you are still boasting.”

“Did I want them to forgive me? Bah! ” Mei Chaofeng was furious. “Six Freaks, have your martial arts improved greatly? Want to try me?”

“Why would they want to fight you personally? Even their disciple won’t necessarily lose to you,” Huang Rong said.

Mei Chaofeng was so angry she almost screamed, “If I can’t kill him in three stances, I will kill myself right here right now.” She had fought Guo Jing in the Zhao palace and thought she knew his level of martial arts. What she didn’t know was that in the past few months Guo Jing had received the tutelage of the ‘Nine-Fingered Divine Beggar’. His skill now couldn’t be compared to his skill then.

“Good!” Huang Rong said, “Let all the people here bear witness. Three stances are too few, let’s give you ten.”

“I will match Senior Mei for fifteen stances,” Guo Jing said. He’d only learned fifteen out of the eighteen moves of the ‘Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms’, hence he thought he could at least survive fifteen stances.

“Ask Martial Brother Lu and the guest who accompanied you to be the witnesses,” Huang Rong added.

“Who accompanies me?” Mei Chaofeng was taken aback. “I rushed to this manor alone...who came with me?”

“Who is that behind you then?” Huang Rong asked.

Mei Chaofeng threw a sudden backward punch, quick as lightning. Nobody saw the man move, but her attack hit empty space. That person moved like he was a ghost or spirit; the amazing part was that he moved without making a sound.

After she arrived in the Jiangnan region Mei Chaofeng always had the feeling that somebody was following her, but no matter how she spoke or attacked, she could never hear anything. She thought she was losing her mind, or it was a ghost haunting her. And then she heard the flute driving away the snakes and she was certain someone with a very high level of martial arts was shadowing her. She had tried to express her gratitude to the air, but nobody answered. She waited among the trees, but was not sure if that person had left or not. Now she heard Huang Rong speak and she was unable to hide her feeling.

“Who are you?” she asked, trembling, “What do you want from me?”

That person did not answer. Nobody knew if he even heard the question. Mei Chaofeng thrust herself forward. That person did not seem to move but again she did not touch anything. Everybody was stunned. They had never seen someone with this person’s immeasurable skill.

Lu Chengfeng boldly asked, “The Honorable Guest has come from a long way and I have not had the opportunity to welcome you. Would you please sit down and have a drink with me?”

That person turned around, seemingly floating on air as he went outside.

Mei Chaofeng gathered her courage and asked, "Is Honorable Senior the one who played the flute to help me? Mei Chaofeng is deeply grateful."

Nobody was able to restrain their amazement. Being a blind woman, Mei Chaofeng had very sharp ears, but she could not hear that person leaving the hall.

"Mei Shijie, that person has already left," Huang Rong said.

Mei Chaofeng was startled. "He did? I ... How could I not hear him?"

"Go after him quickly; don't boast about yourself in here," Huang Rong said.

Mei Chaofeng was dumbfounded. Her face showed sadness, yet there was a tinge of anger. Suddenly she shouted, "Guo Kid, take this!" She lifted both hands with all ten fingers out-stretched, emanating a spooky bluish green aura in the candlelight; but she did not attack.

"I am here," Guo Jing said.

As soon as Mei Chaofeng heard the word 'I' her right hand moved, followed by her left hand's five fingers, towards Guo Jing's face.

Guo Jing saw her fast movement; he slightly leaned his body sideways and sent his left palm toward her. Mei Chaofeng heard the sound of the palm and was about to evade, but she was not fast enough for the 'Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms' exquisite move and her shoulder was struck. She was shaken and forced to retreat three steps. But her martial arts were not weak. While stepping backwards she sent her fingernails to counterattack. Guo Jing was taken by surprise and his right wrist was caught by Mei Chaofeng on three acupoints: 'Inner Gate' [nei guan], 'Outer Gate' [wai

guan], and 'Ancestor Meeting' [hui zong]. Guo Jing had carefully heeded his masters warning, that Mei Chaofeng's 'Nine Yin White Bone Claw' [jiu yin bai gu zhua] was very lethal; hence he guarded himself carefully. But now he could not avoid being grasped by those deadly fingers. "Not good!" he screamed. His whole body felt weak. In that critical moment he managed to bend two fingers, and with his hand forming a half-palm-half-fist he hit her chest. That was the 'Hidden Dragon is Forbidden' [qian long wu yong]. It was supposed to be followed by his left hook – a brilliant stance difficult to fend; but since his left wrist was in the enemy's hand, he could only launch a half stance. But the 'Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms' was amazing and even a half stance was no small matter.

Mei Chaofeng heard the incredible wind generated by this half-palm-half-fist move; she did not dare to parry but tried to elude it. Still her shoulder was hit very hard and she was forced to let Guo Jing go.

As Guo Jing was struggling to free himself, he pulled hard, so when his hand was suddenly free both people were thrown backwards and each hit a pillar. The roof shook and bricks, stones and dust fell down into the hall. Many manor people cried out and ran to escape.

The Six Freaks of Jiangnan looked at each other with amazement but were also pleasantly surprised. "Where did Jing'er learn this kungfu?" they asked in their hearts. Han Baoju looked at Huang Rong suspiciously; he thought she was the one who taught Guo Jing and secretly felt admiration, "Peach Blossom Island's martial arts are amazing."

By now Guo Jing and Mei Chaofeng were engaged in a fierce battle. Palms, fists, and claws were exchanged. Mei Chaofeng was furious and she fought with gusto. Guo Jing

was calm but agile. Both had exerted their full strength and the hall was filled with the sound of their blows.

Suddenly Mei Chaofeng jumped vertically; her attacks seemed to come from every direction, one after another, ever changing. Guo Jing knew this attack was fierce and he would suffer defeat if he left any openings in his defense. He recalled Hong Qigong's lesson on how to deal with Huang Rong's 'Peach Blossom Divine Sword Palm [tao hua shen jian zhang]; no matter how many changes his opponent executed he steadily used fifteen moves out of the 'Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms'.

By repeating these fifteen moves he was able to defend himself for forty to fifty moves; without giving Mei Chaofeng even half a step advantage.

Huang Rong was keeping her eyes on her 'Jing ge ge' with a smile on her pretty face. The Six Freaks stood still in amazement, sometimes clucking their tongues in praise. Lu Chengfeng and his son could only look on in dismay.

"Mei Shijie has improved so much," Lu Chengfeng thought. "If I had to fight her, I would certainly lose my life in only ten moves ... This young Brother Guo, how could he master such a profound kungfu at his young age? I was really blind ... Luckily I was not careless or indiscreet, but treated him with politeness and respect."

Wanyan Kang was also upset, "I was supposed to compete with this boy; with his kungfu, how could I win?"

"Mei Shijie, you have been fighting for more than eighty moves. Why don't you admit defeat?" Huang Rong loudly called out. Actually they had only fought for about sixty moves, but she exaggerated by adding twenty more.

Mei Chaofeng was fuming. "I have trained hard for dozens of years but cannot cope with this kid?" she thought. She ignored Huang Rong's remark and increased the speed of her attacks. Her kungfu was actually many times better than Guo Jing's; but first, she was at a disadvantage because of her blindness, and second, she could not think straight because her heart was filled with rage in her efforts to seek revenge for her husband. Anger is a big taboo in a battle between two martial arts experts. Thirdly, Guo Jing had the advantage of a youth's strength, plus he had mastered most of the 'Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms'. Therefore, the battle between these two was extremely fierce.

After about a hundred moves, Mei Chaofeng started to recognize and become more familiar with Guo Jing's fifteen moves. She knew Guo Jing's line of defense was formidable; she could feel the wind from more than ten feet away. But she also knew that performing the 'Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms' took a lot of energy, and her internal energy was stronger than Guo Jing's. Therefore, Mei Chaofeng changed her tactics and was trying to tire him. She used the 'Nine Yin White Bone Claw' and 'Heart Destroying Palm Technique' [cui xin zhang] interchangeably.

Huang Rong knew if this fight was further prolonged, Guo Jing would suffer defeat. "Mei Shijie, it's more than a hundred moves and quickly will reach the two-hundredth move. You still don't want to admit defeat?" she called. But Mei Chaofeng turned a deaf ear and increased the intensity of her attacks.

Suddenly Huang Rong had an idea; she leaped to a nearby pillar and called out, "Jing ge ge, look at me!" Guo Jing launched two moves in succession: 'Wading a Wide Creek' [li she da chuan] and the 'Phoenix Slowly Arises from the

Land' [hong jian yu lu], and managed to push Mei Chaofeng back far enough so that he could turn his eyes to Huang Rong. He saw her running around the pillar and making some hand signals, but did not understand what she wanted. So she called out again, "Fight here!"

Guo Jing finally understood; he turned around and leaped toward a nearby pillar. Mei Chaofeng followed with her five fingers to grab him, but her claw ended up penetrating the pillar. As a blind woman, she used sounds to know the whereabouts of her opponent; but the pillar was fixed in place and did not make any sounds at all. When Guo Jing hid behind one, how would she know?

As soon as Guo Jing overcame his surprise he immediately launched a palm which Mei Chaofeng parried. Two forces collided and both were pushed back several steps while Mei Chaofeng's fingers were freed from the pillar. Mei Chaofeng was very angry and she did not waste another second. Before Guo Jing could steady himself she sent another attack his way.

Guo Jing was able to elude it, but his clothes were ripped and his arm was scratched by her fingernails. Luckily he was not injured, but Mei Chaofeng had scared the hell out of him. Guo Jing quickly counterattacked by launching three successive moves combined with hiding behind the pillar. Mei Chaofeng shouted angrily as once again her fingers pierced the pillar.

Actually Guo Jing did not want to take advantage of her blindness, so he loudly called out, "Senior Mei, my kungfu is far inferior to yours; please show me mercy!"

Everybody could see that Guo Jing had gained the upper hand albeit with the help of the pillar. They knew he was giving Mei Chaofeng face by asking her to stop. Lu



Chengfeng also thought that this was a good time to stop the fight.

But Mei Chaofeng coldly said, "If we were competing in martial arts and when I could not defeat you in three moves I should have admitted defeat. But today's fight is not a martial arts competition; I am seeking revenge for my husband. I have already lost to you, but I still want to kill you!" As soon as she finished speaking both arms launched successive attacks: three times with her right hand and another three with her left. Each attack hit the pillar squarely on. Finally both her hands hit the pillar at the same time. With a loud crack the pillar broke and the roof collapsed.

The people in the hall were martial artists; even though they were shocked they could still jump out to escape. Lu Guanying grabbed his father and rushed outside just in time before half the hall was filled with debris. Unfortunately the Jin officer was not able to escape and his legs were pinned beneath a beam. He was screaming for help. Wanyan Kang rushed to his rescue. He lifted the beam up, pulled him up, grabbed his hands and took him out of the hall. As soon as they turned their backs they suddenly felt numbness; without knowing who, someone had sealed their acupoints.

Mei Chaofeng had always concentrated her attention on Guo Jing. As soon as she heard Guo Jing move she followed. By now, under heavy cloud, the outside was dark. As soon as everybody was able to calm him or herself, they could see Guo Jing's and Mei Chaofeng's fight had become fiercer than ever. They fought in the dim light; both parties exchanged swift blows one after another, creating gusts of wind everywhere. Compared to the fight inside the hall this fight was more intense.

The darkness was a disadvantage for Guo Jing and he started to fall under Mei Chaofeng's attacks. Mei Chaofeng's left leg made a sweeping move, followed by her right leg kicking toward his legs. If he was hit, his leg would break for sure. But this kick was a trick move. Mei Chaofeng unexpectedly held her leg half way and her left arm grabbed Guo Jing's leg. Lu Guanying was looking from the sidelines. "Watch out!" he cried. He had experienced defeat from Wanyan Kang with this exact same move.

In this dangerous situation Guo Jing tried hard to overcome his fear and used his left hand to parry Mei Chaofeng's hand. He was fast enough, but his strength was waning. As soon as their hands collided, Mei Chaofeng understood his situation. She immediately turned her hand over and used three fingers: middle, ring, and little finger to scratch the back of Guo Jing's hand. Guo Jing also realized the danger he was in as his right palm thrust toward her. It was a fierce attack; if Mei Chaofeng did not back off, both of them would be injured. Mei Chaofeng avoided the attack by leaping sideways and then uttered a sinister laugh.

Guo Jing felt his left hand become numb and itchy, then felt a burning sensation. Lowering his head he saw three scratch marks on the back of his left hand. The scratches were bleeding only a little but the blood slowly turned black. He suddenly remembered the time he climbed that hill on the Mongolian Steppe and saw nine skulls Mei Chaofeng left behind. Priest Ma Yu had told him that Mei's fingernails contained lethal poison and he knew immediately that his life was in grave danger.

"Rong'er, I have been poisoned!" he called out. Without waiting for Huang Rong's response he immediately jumped forward and threw both palms at Mei Chaofeng. His intention was to seize her and force her to hand over the antidote. It was his only chance of survival.

Mei Chaofeng recognized the fierceness of his attack and jumped back to elude. Huang Rong and the others were greatly shocked by Guo Jing's revelation. Almost together Ke Zhen'E with his iron staff followed by Huang Rong and the rest of the Six Freaks jumped forward and surrounded Mei Chaofeng.

"Mei Shijie!" Huang Rong shouted, "You have already lost! How could you keep fighting? Quickly, bring out the antidote and save him!"

Mei Chaofeng felt Guo Jing's attack was both swift and fierce; she did not dare to lose her concentration by replying to Huang Rong's remark. In her heart she was delighted, "The more you exert your energy, the quicker the poison will attack your system. Should I die here and now, I still have succeeded in gaining revenge for my husband."

Guo Jing noticed his vision blurring, his head felt dizzy and his whole body felt weak. As he gradually lost control of his left arm, he decided to stop fighting. The poison had begun to enter his system. Had he not drunk the snake's blood he would have died by now.

Huang Rong saw his dazed condition and loudly called, "Jing ge ge, get back!" Taking out a butterfly steel needle she jumped toward Mei Chaofeng.

Guo Jing heard her call and it raised his spirits. He thrust his left palm using the eleventh stance of the 'Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms', 'Sudden Advent' [tu ru qi lai] only his arm moved slower than it was supposed to.

Huang Rong, Han Baoju, Nan Xiren and Quan Jinfa moved together to attack Mei Chaofeng but saw Guo Jing's palm squarely hit Mei Chaofeng's shoulder. She fell down without even having tried to fend against the attack. Mei Chaofeng relied on her ears to locate her opponent's movement and

Guo Jing's attack was so slow it did not make any noise. That was the reason she was easily hit.

Huang Rong was startled, but Han, Nan and Quan had simultaneously thrown themselves on Mei Chaofeng's body to seize her. But she struggled and was able to send Han Baoju and Quan Jinfa flying backward, while at the same time striking backward to grasp Nan Xiren's arm. Nan Xiren saw this attack coming and rolled out of the way.

Mei Chaofeng took advantage of this chaotic situation to leap up, but Guo Jing's palm unexpectedly arrived on her back and she tumbled down one more time. Guo Jing's palm was swift and silent, but it was weak. Even though she was hit on a vital place, she was not injured.

After attacking twice Guo Jing's energy was depleted; he staggered and fell down right next to Mei Chaofeng. Huang Rong immediately threw herself toward him to protect him.

Mei Chaofeng heard someone falling at her side and without wasting a single moment she sent five fingers to grab, but to her surprise she felt pricking pain. She realized she had hit the thorns on Huang Rong's 'Soft Hedgehog Armor' [ruan wei jia]. Hastily she used 'To Leap Like a Carp' [li yu da ting] to get away.

Suddenly somebody shouted, "Take this!" and something was thrown her way. Mei Chaofeng did not know what was being thrown so she just lifted her right arm to parry. That thing fell down broken to pieces. It turned out it was a chair.

That chair was followed by another thing, bigger than the first. This time 'Iron Corpse' stretched her left hand to grab it. It was a tabletop; wide and slippery, so she could not get a good grasp. Who threw all these things at her? It was Zhu Cong. He immediately threw a couple of table legs her way.

Mei Chaofeng lifted her leg and kicked them away. Zhu Cong eluded them but at the same time stretched out his right hand and suddenly Mei Chaofeng felt three things slip down her collar. They were cold and slippery, and kept wiggling inside her clothes. She was frightened, "What are these things? Is it some witchcraft or secret weapons?" Hastily she groped around inside her clothes and caught three goldfish.

She was relieved, but suddenly she froze! Her porcelain antidote bottle had disappeared, along with her dagger and the scroll of the 'Nine Yin Manual' which was wrapped around the dagger.

The three goldfish were from the cistern that was crushed when the roof collapsed. Zhu Cong knew Mei Chaofeng was careful and could not be easily deceived, unlike Peng Lianhu or Qiu Qianren; so he used the goldfish to divert her attention while at the same time executed his quick hand to take Mei Chaofeng's pocket's contents. He took the porcelain bottle out, pulled its stopper and took it to Ke Zhen'E to smell while whispering softly, "Well?"

Ke Zhen'E was an expert at using poison. As soon as he smelled the antidote he said, "To be taken orally and also applied to the wound. This is the antidote."

Mei Chaofeng heard their conversation and immediately realized what happened. Furiously she leaped toward them. Ke Zhen'E swung his iron staff to block her, assisted by Han Baoju's 'Golden Dragon Whip' [jin long bian], Quan Jinfa's 'Weighing Scale' [cheng gan], and Nan Xiren's 'Steel Carrying Pole' [chun gang bian dan]. Mei Chaofeng quickly put her hand to her waist to retrieve her own 'Poison Silver Dragon Whip' but suddenly heard a gust of wind from a sword coming her way. It was Han Xiaoying. She was forced to parry this attack first.

Meanwhile Zhu Cong gave the antidote to Huang Rong. "Have him swallow some, then spread some on his wound," he said. Then he put the dagger he took from Mei Chaofeng into Guo Jing's pocket. "This dagger was yours," he said. Joining his brothers and sister he raised his iron fan to attack Mei Chaofeng. The six had trained hard these past ten years and had improved their martial arts considerably. Therefore, this battle was many times fiercer than the one on that barren Mongolian hill.

Lu Chengfeng and his son were amazed witnessing this fierce battle. "Mei Chaofeng's martial arts are no doubt swift, fierce and ruthless, but these Six Freaks of Jiangnan certainly live up to their names," they thought. "Ladies and gentlemen, please stop! Please listen to what I have to say!" Lu Chengfeng shouted loudly. But both parties were fighting fiercely, who would actually have time to listen to him?

Not long after he took the antidote, Guo Jing was slowly regaining his sense. The poison had attacked his system quickly, but the antidote also neutralized it fast. His wound was still hurting, but he was able to move his left arm. After putting the dagger away he immediately jumped up and rejoined the battle. Learning from before, he started slowly and when his palm was almost touching Mei Chaofeng's body, he added more strength. It was the stance 'A Hundred Li Shock' [zhen jing bai li]. Mei Chaofeng was busy fending off her attackers and could not hear Guo Jing's palm. She was hit suddenly and fell down immediately right at the moment when Han Baoju's whip and Nan Xiren's pole were coming down on her.

Guo Jing leaned and parried those two weapons. "Masters! Please show mercy!" he shouted. The Six Freaks complied. They withdrew their weapons and leaped back.

Mei Chaofeng stood up and got ready to fight again. Knowing that Guo Jing was fierce and she could not see, she took her 'Poison Silver Dragon Whip' [du long yin bian] and readied it in front of her. Guo Jing did not move, "We are not going to fight you anymore. You are free to go!" he shouted.

Mei Chaofeng put her whip back and said, "Please return my manual." Zhu Cong was puzzled. "I did not take your manual," he said. "You know the Seven Freaks have never lied." He did not realize that the skin wrapped around the dagger was the 'Nine Yin Manual'.

Mei Chaofeng knew that even though the Seven Freaks of Jiangnan had deep enmity toward her, they always meant what they said and never deceived anybody. She thought the manual must have fallen when she was fighting Guo Jing a moment ago. So she bent down and groped around on the ground looking for the manual. Where could that manual be?

A blind lady groping around the ground made a pitiful scene. Lu Chengfeng told his son, "Guanying, help your Martial Uncle Mei to look." But in his heart he was thinking that the manual belonged to his Master, therefore, it must be returned to the Master. He faked a cough to signal his son and Lu Guanying understood. He nodded. Guo Jing was also looking around, but where did that manual go?

"Mei Shijie," Lu Chengfeng said, "Your manual is not here; perhaps you dropped it on your way here."

Mei Chaofeng did not answer; she kept groping around. Suddenly everybody's eyes were blurred as that green-robed man reappeared beside her. His movement was so swift that nobody saw anything as Mei Chaofeng's body was lifted off the ground and an instant later they were gone,

vanishing among the trees outside the hall. Mei Chaofeng was very skilled, yet that man had captured her without any struggle. They looked at each other in blank dismay. This person's skill was unbelievable.

The hall was quiet; only the distant sound of the waves of the lake lapping the shore could be heard. A long while later Ke Zhen'E broke the silence. "My young disciple fought that wicked woman and damaged your mansion. I feel deep regret."

"I do not dare complain," Lu Chengfeng answered. "The Six Freaks and Hero Guo visiting our place today was an honor to us all. No need to mention that you have helped my family escape a disaster. What Hero Ke just said, wouldn't that make us seem like strangers?"

"I invite the honorable guests to take a rest inside the hall," Lu Guanying added. "Brother Guo, are you still in pain?"

"I am all right," answered Guo Jing. At that moment the green-robed man came back along with Mei Chaofeng. They stood in front of the hall. Mei Chaofeng put her hands on her waist and shouted, "Guo Kid! You used Hong Qigong's 'Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms' to fight me. I am blind and could not see your moves. Mei Chaofeng does not care about life or death, victory or defeat; but if this matter were spread in the Jianghu world, wouldn't the reputation of my Benevolent Master of Peach Blossom Island be ruined? Come! Let us fight again!"

"I am not your match," Guo Jing answered honestly. "I took advantage of your blindness to protect my own life. I admitted defeat a while ago."

"The 'Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms' have eighteen moves," Mei Chaofeng asked, "Why did you only use part of it?"



"Because I am not smart ..." Guo Jing answered; Huang Rong signaled him not to reveal his secret, but Guo Jing continued, "... Senior Hong only taught me fifteen moves."

"Very good!" Mei Chaofeng said. "You only know fifteen moves yet you defeated Mei Chaofeng. Is that old man Hong Qigong really that good? No! I can't accept it. We must fight again!"

Everybody felt this was strange; apparently Mei Chaofeng had not come back to avenge her husband, but to dispute Huang Yaoshi and Hong Qigong's reputations.

Guo Jing was still calm. "Miss Huang is younger than I am, yet I'm still not her match; how could I be your match?" he said. "I have always admired Peach Blossom Island's martial arts."

"Mei Shijie," Huang Rong interrupted. "What are you talking about? Who in the world can surpass Father's martial arts skill?"

"Still, I must fight him again!" Mei Chaofeng insisted. Without waiting for Guo Jing to answer she stretched her claw towards him. Guo Jing could not hold himself back much longer and so eluded the attack. He said, "If that's the case, I will ask Senior Mei to give me some lessons." Then he launched a strong counterattack.

Mei Chaofeng parried it by turning her hand. "Use your silent moves!" she said, "You are not my match if you are using loud moves."

Guo Jing leaped back several steps and said, "My First Master Ke's eyes are not perfect. I hate when others bully him with silent moves. How could I use silent moves to bully you? I was injured by your poison and at that critical

moment I inadvertently use a silent move. If we fight fair and square, frankly I am not your match."

Mei Chaofeng could hear the sincerity in his voice, her heart was stirred. "This kid is kind hearted," she thought. But she shouted, "I told you to use your silent moves. I have a way to counter it, why do you keep nattering like an old woman?"

Guo Jing looked at that strange green-robed man. "Could it be that he taught her how to cope with silent moves just now?" he thought. But because Mei Chaofeng insisted, he did not have any choice but to comply. "Very well," he finally said. "I will fight you another fifteen moves." He thought that by using the fifteen out of 'Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms' he might not win, but at least he could defend himself.

Guo Jing jumped to get closer to her, then continued by tiptoeing forward, slowly sending his palm to strike. But before his palm hit its target he heard a light sound and Mei Chaofeng turned her wrist to grab his hand. It was like her eyes were not blind at all. Guo Jing was surprised; he immediately pulled his left palm and slid his body to the left to launch the 'Skillfully Crossing a Vast River' slowly.

His palm had only moved several inches when again he heard a light sound and Mei Chaofeng blocked his attack. Guo Jing retracted his palm a little bit too slow and Mei Chaofeng's fingernails swept very close to his face. He hastily leaped back and thought, "How could she know where my next attack would be?"

His third attack was his fiercest stance, the 'Proud Dragon Shows Remorse' [kang long you hui] but again, following a light sound, Mei Chaofeng's steel-like fingernails moved to grab his wrist. Guo Jing knew the secret must be in that

light sound, so with his fourth move he stole a glance at that strange man. This time he was able to see that man flick something into the air and that thing created a light sound.

“Ah, it really is him!” Guo Jing understood. “But how could he know where my next move will be? Hmmm ... it was like the time when Huang Rong fought that old man Liang Ziwing; Hong Qigong had deduced his attacks in advance. Now this man is using the same method to defeat me. All right, I’ll fight for the full fifteen moves, and then I will admit defeat.”

Even though the stances of the ‘Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms’ did not change and Guo Jing had not learned the whole set, his attacks were not light. However, Mei Chaofeng always knew in advance where his attack would go and sometimes she would move ahead of Guo Jing so that instead of being defensive, she was actually on the offensive.

Several moves later that strange man flicked three pebbles in succession. Mei Chaofeng was following the sound and launched three attacks one after another. Guo Jing was forced to elude one and barely managed to parry the other two.

The fight was getting fiercer and the winds generated by their hands were getting stronger. Periodically the light sound of a pebble was heard. Huang Rong understood the situation was not favorable. She silently picked some debris from the floor and flicked them away. Some were just aimed at nothing in particular, trying to confuse Mei Chaofeng, while some were aimed to knock the strange man’s pebbles down. But, unexpectedly, the man’s pebbles were not knocked down by Huang Rong’s debris; on the contrary, Huang Rong’s debris was knocked down while his pebbles kept flying. His clues to Mei Chaofeng were not hindered.

Lu Chengfeng, his son, along with the Six Freaks, were greatly amazed. "The strength of this man's fingers is amazing; how is he capable of giving the pebble this kind of force? Even an arrow would not create such a strong noise. If this pebble hit someone, wouldn't that someone's bones be shattered by it?" they thought.

By now Huang Rong had stopped her intervention. She stood and stared blankly at that strange man. In the meantime Guo Jing was starting to lose; Mei Chaofeng's attacks became swifter and fiercer.

Suddenly two loud hums were heard as two pebbles flew from the strange man's hand. The first one was slower than the latter one. The latter hit the first and two pebbles broke into pieces and flew in all directions. Mei Chaofeng took that opportunity to pounce on Guo Jing. He stumbled trying to avoid the attack. Remembering Nan Xiren's advice, 'If you can't win, run!' [da bu guo, tao!] He turned around and ran away.

Out of the blue Huang Rong called out, "Father!" And she rushed toward the strange man, threw herself into his arms and loudly cried, "Father! Your face ... what happened to your face ...?" Nobody expected this and the strange man stood still without saying anything.

Guo Jing turned around and saw Mei Chaofeng standing very close to him. She was trying to listen to the sound of the pebble. Guo Jing saw a very good opportunity and sent his right palm slowly toward her shoulder using only about ten percent of his strength. But as soon as his palm hit, his left palm followed at full strength. Mei Chaofeng was squarely hit by both palms and fell down; she was not able to stand back up.

Lu Chengfeng heard Huang Rong call that strange man her father; he was overwhelmed with joy and sorrow at the same time. He forgot his legs were lame and jumped toward the man, but fell face down on the floor.

The strange man's left arm was in Huang Rong's embrace and lifted his right hand to slowly take off a thin mask from his face. He was wearing a genuine skin mask; no wonder his face was emotionless like that of a corpse. His true appearance was clear and good-looking, with a hint of sadness. Yet an aura of dignity surrounded him; resembling the image of deity.

Huang Rong's tears had not dried yet she shouted with joy. She snatched the mask from her father's hand and placed it on her own face while bouncing up and down and hugging the man's neck, giggling continuously. The man was indeed the Master of Peach Blossom Island, Huang Yaoshi.

"Father, why did you come here?" she asked, grinning from ear to ear. "That old man Qiu said bad things about you. Why didn't you teach him a lesson?"

"Why did I come?" Huang Yaoshi sternly asked. "I came looking for you!" Huang Rong was ecstatic; she clapped her hands and shouted, "Father! You were looking for me? Wonderful...that's just wonderful!"

"What do you mean 'wonderful'?" Huang Yaoshi asked. "Do you think it was wonderful finding a useless girl like you?"

Huang Rong felt bad. She knew after losing the second half of the 'Nine Yin Manual' to his own disciples, Chen Xuanfeng and Mei Chaofeng, her father was determined to master the skill with his own intelligence. He once said that the 'Nine Yin Manual' was created by a human being. If a man could create it, why wouldn't he be able to re-create it? He then made a vow not to leave Peach Blossom Island

until he had mastered the skill. Unexpectedly his prodigal daughter had run away so that he was forced to break his own vow and come looking for her.

"Father, I promise to be a good daughter and will listen to you from now on until the day I die," Huang Rong solemnly promised.

Huang Yaoshi was very happy to find his daughter well and listening to her promise put him in an excellent mood. "Help your Shijie get up," he said.

Huang Rong immediately complied. Lu Guanying helped his father to kneel down in front of his Master. Huang Yaoshi sighed and said, "Chengfeng, you are a good disciple. I was wrong to lose my temper and act so rashly as to falsely accuse you."

Lu Chengfeng was sobbing. "Master, are you well?" To which Huang Yaoshi replied, "Luckily I've not been irritated to death." Huang Rong looked at her father with a mischievous look, "Father, you're not talking about me are you?" Huang Yaoshi snorted and said, "You are part of it."

Huang Rong stuck out her tongue and diverted his attention. "Father, let me introduce you to my friends. These are the well-known heroes of Jianghu, the Six Freaks of Jiangnan; Jing ge ge's Masters."

Huang Yaoshi did not even look at them. "I don't want to meet outsiders," he said coldly. The Six Freaks were irritated by his arrogance, but since the man practiced god-like martial arts, they kept their peace.

"Do you have anything you'd like to take home with you?" Huang Yaoshi asked his daughter. "Get them and we'll go home together."

“Nothing,” Huang Rong answered with a smile. “But I do have something I need to give back to Martial Brother Lu.” She took out the ‘Nine Flower Jade Dew’ pills from her pocket and gave them back to Lu Chengfeng. “Lu Shige (Elder Martial Brother Lu), these pills are not easy to make. We have two pills from you and that’s enough.”

Lu Chengfeng waved his hand and said to Huang Yaoshi, “The disciple has seen the Benevolent Master today. I am extremely joyful. I want to present those pills to you. I wonder if you could stay for a while in my humble abode. I will be ...”

“Is he your son?” Huang Yaoshi interrupted him, pointing toward Lu Guanying. “He is,” answered the disciple.

Lu Guanying did not wait for his father’s prompting. He immediately kneeled and kowtowed several times and said, “Disciple pays his respects to Grand Martial Master.”

“It’s all right!” Huang Yaoshi said. Without bending his body he extended his left hand as if he was going to help Guanying to stand up; but unexpectedly his right hand struck Guanying’s shoulder.

Lu Chengfeng was shocked! “Master, he is my only son ...” Huang Yaoshi’s palm was not light. Lu Guanying was thrown back seven or eight steps then fell face down on the floor.

“You are a very good disciple,” Huang Yaoshi told Lu Chengfeng. “You have not passed your skills to him. Is he a disciple of the ‘Immortal Red Cloud Sect’ [xian xia pai]?”

Lu Chengfeng was relieved to know his master was only testing his son’s martial arts. “Your disciple did not dare to disobey our school’s rule. I did not dare to teach my skills to others without Benevolent Master’s permission. This child is

indeed the disciple of 'Great Teacher Kumu' [ku mu da shi] of the 'Immortal Red Cloud Sect'."

Huang Yaoshi sneered, "Kumu dares to call himself 'Great Teacher' [da shi can also mean 'great master'] with his skills? Your skills exceed his a hundred fold. Starting tomorrow you will teach your son. The 'Immortal Red Cloud Sect's' martial arts do not hold a candle to ours."

Lu Chengfeng was ecstatic and hastily told his son, "Quick! Express your gratitude to the Grand Martial Master!" Lu Guanying immediately kowtowed again to Huang Yaoshi. Huang Yaoshi lifted his head, completely ignoring Guanying.

Lu Chengfeng had learned martial arts on Peach Blossom Island; even though both his legs were lame he did not lose any skills pertaining to his upper body. He realized very well the superiority of his own school. He had seen with his own eyes how hard Lu Guanying trained, yet his achievements were limited. This upset him, but since he did not dare to violate his school's rule, he had to restrain himself. In order not to disappoint his son, he pretended he did not know martial arts at all. Now that his master had given him permission he knew his son's martial arts skills would improve by leaps and bounds; how could he be not happy? He wanted to say some grateful words, but he was choked up.

Huang Yaoshi saw this and he simply said, "Take this!" He waved his right hand and two sheets of paper gently flew toward Chengfeng. The distance between them was actually more than ten feet, but the papers flew gently like they were hand delivered to Lu Chengfeng. This demonstration of internal energy was even more impressive than flicking pebbles, since the paper was flimsy and more difficult to throw. No one could help but feel very impressed.



Huang Rong was very happy, she quietly approached Guo Jing and asked, "Jing ge ge, what do you think of my Father's martial arts?"

"Your Father's martial arts are superb," Guo Jing answered. "Rong'er, as soon as you are home, you have to train diligently, don't waste your time playing."

"You are coming with us, aren't you?" Huang Rong asked.

"I have to follow my Masters," Guo Jing said. "I will look for you later."

Huang Rong was anxious. "No! I don't want to leave you." Guo Jing grinned; he did not want to be separated from her either, but he knew they did not have much choice and was sad too.

Lu Chengfeng took the papers and examined them. He saw the papers were full of characters. Lu Guanying took a torch from a manorr; he came close to his father and held the light for his father to read. Lu Chengfeng could see the papers were full of characters and symbols. They were instructions for training martial arts in Huang Yaoshi's own handwriting. He had not seen his master's handwriting for twenty years, yet he recognized it. The Master's handwriting was tall and straight, as elegant as he remembered it. On the right hand was the title, 'Sweeping Leaves Whirlwind Leg' technique [xuan feng sao ye tui fa], six characters. Lu Chengfeng knew that the 'Sweeping Leaves Whirlwind Leg' and the 'Peach Blossom Island Divine Sword Palms' [luo ying shen jian zhang] were his Master's own ingenious martial arts creations. None of his master's six disciples had ever learned this leg technique. He imagined how delighted he would have been if he'd learned this technique. But still, due to his master's mercy, he could still teach this technique to his son. He was

grateful. He put the papers into his pocket and bent down to express his gratitude.

“This set of leg techniques is entirely different from the ones you knew,” Huang Yaoshi said. “The external techniques remain, but the energy to drive the technique must be developed internally. If you practice and meditate daily, and if your progress is good, you will be able to walk without a cane within five or six years.”

Lu Chengfeng was emotional with all kinds of feelings flowing in his heart.

“Your disability is permanent,” Huang Yaoshi added. “You won’t be able to fight relying on your leg techniques; but if you diligently train, you won’t have any problem walking like normal people. Oh ...” He regretted that consumed with anger he had punished his four innocent disciples severely. In recent years he’d racked his brain to create the new ‘Sweeping Leaves Whirlwind Leg’ technique with improved internal energy training methods. His plan was to find his four disciples and bestow this new technique so that they would be able to walk again. He was too arrogant, so even when his heart was full of regret, his mouth was not willing to admit it. Therefore, although this leg technique was entirely a new creation of his, he still used the irrelevant old name; pretending he had not done anything wrong. After a while he continued, “Look for your three other brothers and teach them this new technique.”

“Yes,” Lu Chengfeng answered. Then he added, “Qu shige (older martial brother) and Feng shidi’s whereabouts are unknown to me, but Wu shidi passed away many years ago.”

Huang Yaoshi felt a stab of pain in his heart and his eyes glistened. Then his penetrating gaze turned toward Mei Chaofeng. Luckily she was blind and could not see it, but

the other people around her shuddered just looking at his gaze.

“Chaofeng,” he said icily. “You have been extremely wicked, but you also have suffered greatly. When that old man Qiu said I was dead, you shed tears and even wanted to seek revenge for me. Because of those tears I am willing to let you live a few more years.”

Not in a million years did Mei Chaofeng expect her master to forgive her that easily. She was delighted and quickly kowtowed. “All right, all right!” Huang Yaoshi said. Then he stretched his hand toward her back and tapped gently three times.

Mei Chaofeng suddenly felt a stabbing pain, which gradually became more intense and she almost passed out. With a trembling voice she begged, “Benevolent Master, your disciple deserves to die ten thousand times. I ask for your mercy to kill me quickly, but please spare me from the ‘Bone-Penetrating Needle’ [fu gu zhen].” She had heard for a long time from her husband that once their master’s ‘fu gu zhen’ entered their bodies, it would attach itself to the bone and slowly dispense poison. Six times a day, following the circulation of the blood, the poison would cause excruciating pain, but it would not kill immediately. It could take as long as a year or two for that person to die slowly from the pain. A highly skilled martial artist would channel his internal energy to counter the pain, but the more he does so the greater the pain. A normal person would only grit their teeth when in pain. Using internal energy to suppress the pain would be like drinking poison to satisfy a thirst, because the next attack would be more intense than the previous one. As far as they knew, there was no antidote for this poison.

Mei Chaofeng was desperate; she had entered a living hell, why would she want to live much longer? She frantically thrashed her whip fiercely trying to take her own life. Huang Yaoshi quickly stretched his hand and snatched the whip away. "Why are you so anxious to die? It's not that easy!" he said coldly.

Mei Chaofeng did not give up easily. "Master must want to torture me, that's why he won't allow me to die," she thought. Unable to restrain her grief she turned toward Guo Jing and smiled sadly, "I have to thank you for killing my husband; at least that way my bastard husband died an easy death."

Huang Yaoshi ignored her remark and said, "The 'Bone-Penetrating Needle' will work after a year. I'll give you three assignments to do within this one-year period. Once you complete your assignments, come and see me at Peach Blossom Island. I have a way to neutralize the poison."

Mei Chaofeng's hope was rekindled. "Your disciple will go through fire or water to accomplish whatever Master cares to assign to me." But Huang Yaoshi coldly answered, "You haven't heard what I have to say, yet you comply that quickly?" Mei Chaofeng did not dare to answer, she only kowtowed.

"First, you have lost the 'Nine Yin Manual'," Huang Yaoshi continued. "You have to find it and give it back to me. If somebody else laid their eyes on it, you must kill that person. If there are a hundred people who have seen it, kill the hundred people. If you only kill ninety-nine, don't even think of coming to see me."

All who listened shuddered involuntarily. The Six Freaks of Jiangnan thought, "Huang Yaoshi is known as the Eastern Heretic; his character is very evil."

They heard him continue, "Qu, Lu, Wu and Feng, your four martial brothers have endured suffering and hardships because of you. You are to find your brothers Lingfeng and Mofeng, and find out if Mianfeng left behind any family. You are to bring them all to 'Returning Cloud Manor' [gui yun zhuang] and let your martial brother Chengfeng take care of them. This is your second assignment."

Mei Chaofeng nodded her head repeatedly. Lu Chengfeng thought, "I could manage this." But knowing his master's temperament he did not dare to say anything.

Huang Yaoshi raised his head, looking at the starry sky above and slowly said, "You stole the 'Nine Yin Manual'. I did not teach you nor did I tell you to practice it. You know what to do." He paused for a moment then said, "This is the third."

Mei Chaofeng was silent for a moment; she did not fully grasp her master's intention. After pondering in her heart she suddenly understood. With a trembling voice she said, "After I have completed the first two assignments, your disciple knows how to get rid of the 'Nine Yin White Bone Claw' and 'Heart Destroying Palm' I have learned."

Guo Jing did not understand; he pulled Huang Rong's sleeve and, signaling her with his eyes, asked for an explanation. Huang Rong's countenance was sad; she lifted her right hand and made a chopping action toward her left arm. Guo Jing finally understood, "Oh, she is going to chop off her own arms." His mind kept wandering, "This Mei Chaofeng is really wicked, but she repented. Why is the punishment so harsh? I need to talk to Rong'er; perhaps we can ask her father to show mercy."

While he was still thinking, Huang Yaoshi beckoned him to come over and asked, "Your name is Guo Jing?" Guo Jing

stepped forward and made an obeisance. "Disciple Guo Jing is at Senior Huang's service."

"You are the one who killed my disciple Chen Xuanfeng, aren't you? Your skill must be extraordinary, eh?" Huang Yaoshi said.

Guo Jing understood his sarcasm; his heart turned cold. "I was very young and ignorant. Senior Chen seized me; I was scared and panicked. I injured him inadvertently."

Huang Yaoshi snorted and coldly said, "Chen Xuanfeng was indeed my rebellious disciple; but it was our right to punish him. How could a disciple of Peach Blossom Island be punished by an outsider?" Guo Jing was dumbstruck.

Huang Rong quickly came to his rescue. "Father, he was only six, what did he know?" Huang Yaoshi did not like what he heard; he continued, "The old man Hong usually does not take disciples and he is very proud of his 'Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms'; but he taught you fifteen moves, so you must have something good in you. If not, you must have sweet-talked him into teaching you. You have defeated my disciple with his skill; next time he sees me, I bet he will boast to no end."

"Father, the sweet talk part was indeed true," Huang Rong said with a smile. "But it was not him, it was I. He is just a simple honest kid. Your words were too harsh, you have frightened him."

After he lost his wife, Huang Yaoshi was very fond of his daughter. In fact, he was too lenient with her so that she became spoilt. That day he scolded her she immediately ran away from home. He thought that being a spoilt kid and after wandering Jianghu for a while Huang Rong would be destitute and in bad condition. Who would have thought that she was not thin and pale, but as tender and beautiful

as ever? Then he saw her affection towards Guo Jing and how she was always trying to protect him. Secretly he was jealous because she had never shown the same affection to him. His jealousy turned to anger. He ignored his daughter and said to Guo Jing, "By teaching you the old Beggar obviously does not hold me in high regard. He let you defeat Mei Chaofeng; he thinks my disciples are a bunch of nobodies ..."

Huang Rong understood that her father was upset because Mei Chaofeng was defeated by the 'Eighteen-Dragon Subduing Palms'. She hurriedly said, "Who says Peach Blossom Island disciples are nobodies? He was lucky because Mei Shijie's eyes are blind, what's so special about that? If they were fighting fair and square, he would have been defeated a long time ago. Let your daughter prove it to you." She jumped out and called to Guo Jing, "Come! Let me use the skills my Father taught me to fight Hong Qigong's special skill."

She knew that by this time both Guo Jing and she had improved tremendously. They were more or less equally matched. She thought that as long as they could fight fairly for about a hundred moves her father would be satisfied. Guo Jing understood her intention; besides, Huang Yaoshi did not say anything, so he agreed and said, "You are always superior to me. All right, I will let you beat me a couple more times." And he immediately walked to Huang Rong.

"Watch out!" Huang Rong called out. Her hand swept horizontally with a gust of wind, it was the 'Heavy Rain Fierce Wind' stance [yu ji feng kuang] from the 'Peach Blossom Divine Sword Palm [tao hua shen jian zhang]. Guo Jing immediately countered using the 'Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms'. However, he was very fond of Huang Rong so did not use his full strength. Unfortunately, the

'Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms' relied heavily on strong internal energy; in terms of palm techniques, it could not be compared to the exquisite moves of 'Peach Blossom Divine Sword Palm'. After several moves he was hit several times by Huang Rong's fist. Huang Rong, on the other hand, knew that Guo Jing was strong and resilient, so to appease her father she used her full strength. "Aren't you going to admit defeat?" she called out loudly. Her mouth said those words, but her hands did not stop hitting him.

Huang Yaoshi sneered, "What kind of acrobatic show are you demonstrating?" Nobody saw him move, but suddenly he was near the two, stretching both hands to grab and throw them away. Although the movements were similar, he only flung his daughter to the side, while his right arm threw Guo Jing at full strength. His intention was obvious; he wanted Guo Jing to hit the ground hard. However, although Guo Jing was not able to resist the throw, but he was able to turn his body in midair; when he landed, he did not fall down, but stood firmly on the ground. His face was pale and he looked about ready to throw up.

Instead of praising his skill, Huang Yaoshi's anger flared. "I don't have any disciples to fight you. Come! Let me test your few stances."

Guo Jing hastily bowed and said, "Even if I had courage as high as the sky I still would not dare to fight Senior."

Huang Yaoshi sneered. "Humph, fight me?" He coldly said. "You are not my match, boy! Tell you what, I will stand here while you attack me with your 'Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms'; if I even move or raise my hand to parry, you win."

"Junior still does not dare," Guo Jing said.

"I don't care! Dare or not, you have to fight me!" Huang Yaoshi said.



Guo Jing did not know what to do. "I don't have any choice; I'd better hit him several times, but I think he is going to borrow my own strength to shake me up. So what if I have to fall a few more times?" he thought.

Huang Yaoshi saw him hesitating, but his face showed his willingness to try. So he urged him, "Quickly hit me! If not, I am going to hit you!"

"Since Senior commanded it, I would not dare to disobey," Guo Jing said. He bent his body and moved his hand in a circling motion, launching the 'The Proud Dragon Shows Remorse'. He was afraid he might injure Huang Yaoshi; also, he worried that if he used his full strength the counterattack would be fierce. Therefore, he used only sixty percent of his strength. His palm struck Huang Yaoshi's chest; but to his surprise his palm slid like the chest was slick with oil. "Why, you didn't even want to hit me," Huang Yaoshi mocked. "Do you think I cannot take the overwhelming power of the 'Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms'? Is that it?"

"Junior does not dare," Guo Jing answered. Then he launched his second move, the 'Leaping the Abyss' [huo yue zai yuan]. This time he did not hold back. Exhaling, his left palm lunged toward Huang Yaoshi's throat, his right palm swiftly moved in front of the left, going straight to Huang Yaoshi's lower abdomen.

"Now you are fighting," Huang Yaoshi said. Hong Qigong had Guo Jing train this stance against a pine tree. The tree needed to be still, then Guo Jing was supposed to hit it with a sudden movement. Only then did he manage to break the tree. He had practiced this stance thousands of times. But as soon as his palm touched Huang Yaoshi's clothes he felt Huang Yaoshi's abdomen shrink and his palm was sucked

in; he felt pain because his wrist joint was dislocated. He immediately leaped back several feet. His hand hung limp.

The Six Freaks of Jiangnan saw that Huang Yaoshi's body did not move, nor did he lift a hand to parry; yet he was capable of dislocating Guo Jing's wrist. They were amazed but also worried.

"You have to receive my palm also!" Huang Yaoshi suddenly shouted, "I want to let you know which one is superior, the Old Beggar's 'Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms' or my Peach Blossom Island's martial arts." Before he finished speaking a gust of wind had already blown toward Guo Jing. He endured his pain and jumped to avoid the attack. Unexpectedly Huang Yaoshi did not continue his palm but swept his legs instead. Guo Jing went tumbling down.

Huang Rong was alarmed. "Father, no!" she cried, and quickly jumped forward and bent down to protect him.

Huang Yaoshi did not stop; he simply changed his fist to an open palm. He grabbed his daughter's vest and lifted her up, while his left fist went straight toward Guo Jing.

The Six Freaks of Jiangnan realized that if Guo Jing got hit, he would certainly die or at least suffer a very heavy injury. They moved at once. Quan Jinfa was the first. He struck Huang Yaoshi's left arm with his steel balance arm. Huang Yaoshi calmly put his daughter aside; waved both hands casually and that steel balance arm changed direction; striking the long sword in the hands of Han Xiaoying. Both the balance arm and the sword broke into four pieces.

"Master ... !" Lu Chengfeng called out. He wanted to ask his master to stop, but knowing his master's temperament well, he did not dare to continue.

Huang Rong cried. "Father, if you kill him," she shouted. "You will never see me again!" Without further ado she ran out towards Lake Tai and leaped into the water.

Huang Yaoshi was surprised, then angry. He knew his daughter was very good in water. She used to swim and dive in the East China Sea [dong hai]; playing with fish and turtles. Sometimes she went swimming for a whole day. But this time he was not sure when he would be able to see her again. So he ran toward the lake to try to grab her, but he was too late. Huang Rong had already vanished in the dark water. Huang Yaoshi stared blankly from the lakeshore.

After a long while he turned his head and saw Zhu Cong mending Guo Jing's wrist. His anger flared and he wanted to vent his frustration towards these people. "You six people! Quickly kill yourselves and save me the trouble," he said coldly.

Ke Zhen'E wielded his iron staff in front of his chest and proudly said, "Real men do not fear death. Do you think we are afraid of suffering?" Zhu Cong also said, "The Six Freaks of Jiangnan have returned to our hometown. If our bones can be buried here by Lake Tai, what more could we want?" The six unsheathed weapons or readied their bare hands and assumed a battle formation.

Guo Jing thought hard. "My six masters do not have enmity with this man. They will give up their lives in vain. How can I let them go in harm's way?" he said in his heart. He quickly jumped forward. "Chen Xuanfeng died at my hand! It has nothing to do with my masters! I will pay for his life with mine!" But then he had another thought, "The First Master, Third Master and Seventh Master are hot-tempered. If they see me losing my life, they will surely fight to their deaths. I have to stall. I must deal with him later,

alone." He boldly positioned himself between Huang Yaoshi and the Six.

"My only regret is that my father's death has not yet been avenged. I beseech Senior to give me a month's grace. After thirty days I will personally come to Peach Blossom Island to give up my life," he said fearlessly.

Huang Yaoshi's anger had subsided by now; plus, he was worried about his daughter. He'd lost his appetite for fighting. So he waved his hand casually and walked away.

Everybody was surprised; how did Guo Jing's simple speech send him off just like that? They were suspicious that he was playing a trick; so they kept their eyes open at full alert. But after waiting a time, Huang Yaoshi still did not come back.

After a while Lu Chengfeng regained his composure and invited everybody to go back to the hall for some rest.

Mei Chaofeng laughed suddenly, waved her sleeves, then turned around and leaped outside. Before long she had vanished in the dark.

"Mei Shijie!" Lu Chengfeng called out, "Take your disciple with you!"

But the darkness swallowed his voice. Mei Chaofeng had already gone far.

## Chapter 15 - The Divine Dragon Swings Its Tail

Translated by Frans Soetomo with special thanks to Sunnysnow



*He saw in front of her two clay figurines, one resembling a man, the other a woman. These figurines were made in the famous Wuxi city; they were round, fat and really cute. In front of the figurines sat tiny clay bowls filled with flower petals, leaves, and so on.*

A moment later Lu Guanying remembered their other guests; he helped Wanyan Kang stand up but he could not move because his acupoints were still sealed; only his eyes were moving.

"I accepted your Master's request, you may go," Lu Chengfeng said. He did not want to unseal the acupoints, since it was someone outside his school who did that. If he did, he would be showing disrespect towards other people. He therefore cast his glance toward his guests. Before he even said anything Zhu Cong had come up to Wanyan Kang and hit several times on his waist, and tapped some more on his back; unsealing the acupoints.

Lu Chengfeng was impressed. "This Wanyan Kang's martial arts are not weak, yet this man was able to seal his acupoints without any resistance. His martial arts must be good," he thought. What he did not know was that Zhu Cong took advantage of the commotion caused by the collapsing roof so that Wanyan Kang did not even realize what was happening.

Wanyan Kang was ashamed; he turned his back and walked away without saying anything. Zhu Cong saw the Jin officer still lying around; he unsealed his acupoints and called out, "Who is this officer? Take him away."

That officer had thought that he was going to die, but he was unexpectedly released. He was delighted and hurriedly kowtowed, "Valiant Hero ... thank you so much for saving my lowly life. Duan Tiande will not forget it as long as I live.

Next time when you visit the capital, please make sure you stop by my residence, I will be at your service with all my heart ...”

Guo Jing heard that name ‘Duan Tiande’; his ears were buzzing. With a trembling voice he asked, “You ... your name is Duan Tiande?”

“That’s right,” answered Duan Tiande. “Duan Tiande at your service, Young Hero.”

“Eighteen years ago, were you serving as a military officer in Lin’an?” Guo Jing asked.

“How did the Young Hero know that?” Duan Tiande asked; and then he remembered that Lu Chengfeng had mentioned that Lu Guanying was a disciple of the monk Kumu; he turned his head to Lu Guanying and said, “I am Monk Kumu’s nephew, only I did not attend the monastery. I say we belong to the same family. Ha ... ha ...!” He laughed merrily.

Guo Jing looked at him strangely but did not say anything. Meanwhile Duan Tiande was still smiling happily. After a while Guo Jing regained his composure and turned his head to Lu Chengfeng. “Manor Master Lu, may I please borrow your courtyard for a moment?” he asked.

“Sure, use it as you wish,” Lu Chengfeng answered.

Guo Jing took Duan Tiande’s arm and led him to the courtyard in big strides. The Six Freaks of Jiangnan were having mixed feelings; they thought the heavens did indeed have eyes. Had he not said his own name, they would not have known he was the person they’d been looking for these past seven years and tens of thousands li.

Lu Chengfeng and his son, along with Wanyan Kang followed behind. They had no idea what Guo Jing was about to do.

The courtyard was bright with the torches held in the manor servants' hands. Guo Jing requested the use of some writing instruments, which the servants also quickly provided. Guo Jing then turned to Zhu Cong.

"Second Master," he requested, "Would you please write down my father's name?" To which Zhu Cong complied. He wrote in large characters, 'Guo yi shi Xiaotian zhi ling wei' [memorial tablet for the righteous warrior Guo Xiaotian] and placed it on the center table.

When he was taken out of the hall, Duan Tiande thought they were going to enjoy some refreshments; but as soon as he saw the name 'Guo Xiaotian' the blood drained from his face. He looked around and found the Six Freaks of Jiangnan had taken positions surrounding him. He was especially wary of Han Baoju with his short and stout stature; involuntarily he wet his pants. That day when he took Guo Jing's mother to the north with the Seven Freaks of Jiangnan hot on his trail, he stopped at an inn for the night. He heard a commotion and took a peek through a crack in the door and had seen Han Baoju. Han's short and stout stature was not easily forgettable. Earlier that day they met in the hall, but since he was a prisoner, he was more worried about his own fate so that he did not pay too much attention to anyone else. But now under the bright torch light it was impossible to mistake Han Baoju for someone else.

Guo Jing smashed a table and loudly shouted, "Now tell me, do you want a quick and easy death, or do you want me to slice your body with a thousand cuts before killing you?"



Duan Tiande knew he was not going to see another day. He scrambled to find something; anything to save his life. "Your father the chivalrous hero Guo's death was unfortunate and I did have a small role in his death, but ... what could I do as a lowly officer against higher authority?" he stammered.

"Who was that? Who sent you to harm my father? Quick, say it!" Guo Jing shouted.

"It was the Sixth Prince of the Great Jin, Prince Wanyan Honglie," Duan Tiande said.

"What did you say?" Wanyan Kang was startled.

At this point all Duan Tiande could think of was, if he was going down, other people were going down with him. Who knows? He might get away with his crime. Therefore, without concealing anything he narrated how Wanyan Honglie was infatuated with Yang Tiexin's wife, Bao Xiruo; how he conspired with Song authorities to kill Yang Tiexin while Wanyan Honglie would pretend to be the good guy who rescued Bao Xiruo. He told how they ransacked Ox Village and ended up killing Guo Xiaotian; how Duan Tiande then took Guo Jing's mother to Beijing and then joined the Jin envoy to Mongolia. He explained how, during the chaotic times in Mongolia, he got separated from Guo Jing's mother; how he decided to go back to Lin'an and worked diligently as a career soldier, finally to get promoted to his current position. He ended his story by kneeling in front of Guo Jing.

"Young Hero Guo, Guo Da Ren ['honorable' – someone in high position]," he said. "Please do not blame your lowly servant. I saw how chivalrous your father was, how solemn his expression was; I wanted to befriend him, only ... only ... your lowly servant was a very low ranking officer and I must obey orders. It was useless for me to have good intentions.

Heaven is my witness, how I, Duan Tiande, did not have any enmity towards anybody ...” He saw Guo Jing’s expression had not changed a bit and he did not say anything either. He quickly scooted over to the table and kneeled in front of Guo Xiaotian’s memorial. “Master Guo,” he continued. “I am sure your spirit in heaven is very clear that it was the Sixth Prince Wanyan Honglie who killed you, and not this lowly creature in front of you. Today I witnessed that your son is an extraordinary young man, your spirit must be very proud of him. I pray, with your blessing, he will forgive a lowly dog like me ...”

While he was still babbling, Wanyan Kang swiftly leaped, struck with both hands and shattered his skull. He collapsed and died instantly.

Guo Jing kneeled in front of the table, sobbing uncontrollably. Only now did Lu Chengfeng understand the real story, so along with his son and the Six Freaks of Jiangnan they bowed to pay their respects in front of Guo Xiaotian’s memorial. Wanyan Kang also kneeled and kowtowed several times. Then he stood up and said, “Brother Guo, today I know that ... that Wanyan Honglie is our archenemy. Little Brother did not realize it and has committed many-many despicable actions, more like heinous crimes.” And then he remembered his mother’s suffering and wept bitterly.

“What are you going to do then?” Guo Jing lifted his head and asked.

“Little Brother found out today, that my surname is actually ‘Yang’, the name ‘Wanyan’ does not have anything to do with me. From now on, I will be called ‘Yang Kang’,” Wanyan Kang answered.

“Good!” Guo Jing exclaimed. “Finally you are a real man who does not forget your origins. I am going to Beijing tomorrow to kill Wanyan Honglie. Are you coming with me or not?”

Yang Kang still remembered Wanyan Honglie’s kindness in raising him from childhood; he hesitated for a moment. But seeing Guo Jing’s stern expression he hastily answered, “Little Brother will accompany Big Brother to seek revenge.”

Guo Jing was delighted. “Good! You know that our late fathers were sworn brothers and my mother told me that they made a pact to make us sworn brothers too. What do you say?”

“That is precisely my wish,” answered Yang Kang. So they asked each other their respective ages, it turned out that Guo Jing was born two months before Yang Kang. They kneeled in front of Guo Xiaotian’s memorial, bowed eight times toward each other and became sworn brothers.

With everything under control, they turned in to take some rest in Returning Cloud Manor. Early the next morning the Six Freaks, Guo Jing and Yang Kang bade farewell to Manor Master Lu and his son. The Manor Master presented each guest with a generous amount of money as a farewell gift to cover their traveling expenses.

Leaving the village Guo Jing said to his six Masters, “Disciple and Brother Yang are going north to kill Wanyan Honglie. I am asking Masters to give me some advice.”

“The mid-autumn festival is still weeks away, while we do not have anything pressing to do. I think we’d better accompany you to take care of this important business,” Ke Zhen’E said. Zhu Cong and the rest voiced their approval.

“Your kindness towards your disciple is as heavy as a mountain. Wanyan Honglie’s martial arts are mediocre. With Brother Yang’s help, I am sure killing him will not be a difficult task. For your disciple’s sake my Masters have been away from Jiangnan for more than ten years. Now that you are back in your hometown, your disciple does not dare to trouble Masters with my personal business.”

The Six Freaks thought Guo Jing was being very reasonable; also, they had seen with their own eyes that Guo Jing’s martial arts had improved tremendously. Hence they did not press him and one by one they gave their blessings to him.

Finally Han Xiaoying said, “On the matter of Peach Blossom Island, I don’t think you should go.” She knew Guo Jing was uprightly honest and that Huang Yaoshi was hot-tempered and strangely cruel. If Guo Jing went to Peach Blossom Island chances were he would meet some unfortunate events.

“If disciple does not go, wouldn’t that mean I broke my promise to him?” Guo Jing asked.

“When dealing with a monster we don’t have to have good faith,” Yang Kang countered. “Big Brother, I think you adhere too rigidly to old-fashioned values and traditions.”

Ke Zhen’E snorted and said, “Jing’er, as chivalrous heroes we have to do what we say. Today is the fifth day of the sixth month; we will meet again on the first day of the seventh month at the ‘Pavilion of the Drunken Immortal’ in Jiaying [in modern day Zhejiang]. Then we will go to Peach Blossom Island together. Now you’d better rush to Beijing on your red horse to seek revenge. You don’t always have to be with your younger brother. If you can achieve your goal, that would be great. If not, we can always look for the Quanzhen

Sect's priests to help us kill the traitor. Their righteousness is as heavy as a mountain; they certainly will not turn down our request."

Guo Jing understood his First Master's love toward him as shown by his willingness to go with him into a dangerous situation. His heart was overwhelmed and he kneeled and kowtowed respectfully.

"Your younger brother comes from a rich and honorable family, you must be careful," Nan Xiren reminded him. Guo Jing did not understand, he only looked at his master. Han Xiaoying smiled, "You don't understand your Fourth Master's words. It's all right. You will understand later. Just be careful at all times," she said. "Yes," Guo Jing said.

Zhu Cong smiled, "Huang Yaoshi's daughter is actually very different from her father," he said. "We shouldn't provoke her anymore, should we, Third Brother?"

Han Baoju twitched his moustache. "That little brat scolded me even though she is as short as a winter melon; she even thinks herself pretty." Speaking thus he could not restrain a smile.

Guo Jing knew his masters no longer bore any grudges toward Huang Rong; he was delighted. But then he remembered her whereabouts was unknown, he couldn't help feeling depressed.

"Jing'er," Quan Jinfa said, "The sooner you leave, the sooner you will be back. We will wait patiently in Jiaying." With that the Six Freaks of Jiangnan headed south.

Guo Jing held his red horse's reins and followed his masters with his eyes until he no longer could see them. Then he turned his head toward Yang Kang. "My worthy younger brother [xiandi], this red horse of mine is extremely fast; we

can go to Beijing and back within ten days. What do you say I accompany you and spend several days looking around?" Yang Kang agreed. Two young men mounted the horse and headed slowly to the north.

Yang Kang sighed with heavy feelings. Only a month ago he lived a luxurious life. He came to Jiangnan with a great company as a special emissary of the Great Jin, with all the power and prestige that came with it. Now he was traveling back to the capital quietly, with nobody pampering him along the way. It was like he was having a pleasant dream and suddenly woke up to the harsh reality of life. Guo Jing might not necessarily take him along to kill Wanyan Honglie; which made him more distressed. He contemplated warning Wanyan Honglie, but could not make up his mind about it.

Guo Jing, noticing his grim expression, thought that he was mourning the death of his parents and so tried to console him.

Around noon they arrived in Liyang and straightaway tried to find a restaurant for some refreshments. Out of the blue, someone who looked like a restaurant worker, approached. "Are you gentlemen Mr. Guo and Mr. Yang?" he bowed as he asked, smiling broadly. "The table is ready, please come with me and eat."

Guo Jing and Yang Kang were baffled. "How did you know us?" Yang Kang asked.

"A guest arrived earlier and asked us to prepare a meal for you. I was even given a detailed description of how Mr. Guo and Mr. Yang look," he said, still with a smile on his face. He then took the horses' reins and led them to the stable.

Yang Kang snorted and cynically said, "The Returning Cloud Manor Master Lu is so kind." They entered the restaurant

and sat down. As it turned out, the food was exquisite and the wine was superb. Guo Jing even found some chicken that he liked very much. They ate to their hearts' content and were about to pay the bill, but the restaurant worker simply smiled and said, "No need to pay gentlemen, everything has been taken care of." Yang Kang laughed and tipped him generously. He thanked them profusely and led them out of the restaurant, bowing and smiling the whole time.

Guo Jing praised Manor Master Lu's generosity. Yang Kang, however, still bore a grudge because he had been captured and held prisoner. "I assume he uses this trick to befriend the people of Jianghu; no wonder he's the leader of the Lake Tai area," he said.

"Isn't Manor Master Lu your martial uncle?" Guo Jing wondered.

"It's true that Mei Chaofeng taught me some martial arts," Yang Kang answered. "But that doesn't necessarily make her my master. If I had known they came from a heretical sect, I would not have wanted to learn any of it and I wouldn't have fallen into this situation."

"How so?" Guo Jing was confused.

Yang Kang realized he had made an indiscreet remark. He blushed and said with a smile, "Little Brother feels the 'Nine Yin White Bone Claw' and her other martial arts are unorthodox."

Guo Jing concurred. "What my worthy younger brother said is correct. Your master, Priest Changchun's [Eternal Spring] martial arts are exquisite and he comes from an orthodox Taoist school. If you tell him the truth and repent, I am sure he will be willing to forget past matters." Yang Kang silently agreed.

That evening they arrived at Jintan. Again, another restaurant worker welcomed them and led them to a table full of choice foods and wine. This happened for the next three days. The next day the two crossed a river and arrived at Gaoyou and received the same welcome. Yang Kang sneered and said, "I want to see just how far Returning Cloud Manor extends their hospitality." However, Guo Jing was starting to get suspicious; every time they ate, he would find one or two bowls of his favorite food. If it was Lu Guanying, how would he know what he liked?

After they finished eating Guo Jing proposed, "My worthy younger brother, let me go ahead and investigate." Mounting his red horse he quickly rode ahead, passing three scheduled stops and soon arrived at Baoying. Sure enough, nobody welcomed him there. Guo Jing found the biggest inn in town and checked into the best room. That evening he heard a horse with loud ringing bells galloping and stopping right in front of the inn. Someone entered and ordered some food scheduled for tomorrow, for Mr. Guo and Mr. Yang.

Guo Jing had guessed earlier it must be Huang Rong; but on hearing her voice he was overjoyed nonetheless. He restrained himself from coming out to see her. He thought that since Huang Rong liked to play around, he would surprise her later that evening. He slept soundly until about the second hour, quietly got up and went tiptoeing to scare Huang Rong in her room. Then he saw a shadow flashing on the roof; it was Huang Rong. "Where is she going in the middle of the night?" Guo Jing wondered.

Quickly using his lightness kungfu he followed behind. Huang Rong ran without looking around to the outskirts of town; oblivious that somebody was following her. She stopped at the bank of a small creek and sat beneath a



willow tree. She took something out of her pocket and bent down to play with it.

The moonlight shone on her beautiful face as a cool breeze swayed the willow branches and her clothes gently fluttered. The creek whispered softly and the insects chirped quietly. It was a beautiful scene to behold. Guo Jing was about to come near when suddenly he heard Huang Rong quietly say, "This is Jing ge ge, this one is Rong'er. You two sit down nicely face-to-face. Yes, like this ..."

Guo Jing tiptoed behind her. He could not see clearly in the dim moonlight, but he saw in front of her two clay figurines, one resembled a man, the other a woman. These figurines were made in the famous Wuxi city; they were round, fat and really cute. During their stay at Returning Cloud Manor Guo Jing had learned from Huang Rong that although mere toys, Wuxi's products were the result of very high quality craftsmanship. The locals called them 'da a fu' [big lucky]. Huang Rong owned several such figurines on Peach Blossom Island.

Guo Jing came nearer and saw in front of the figurines tiny clay bowls filled with flower petals, leaves, and so on. He heard her saying softly, "Jing ge ge can eat this bowl, Rong'er will have this one. Rong'er cooked them herself. Aren't they delicious?"

"Delicious, very delicious!" Guo Jing said as he stepped out.

Huang Rong was startled. She turned her head and smiled sweetly; rushed into Guo Jing's arms and hugged him tightly. They sat shoulder-to-shoulder beneath the willow tree busily talking about what had happened during their few days of separation [which felt like years to them]. Actually it was Huang Rong who busily talked; Guo Jing was

content with simply looking at her face and listening to her chatter.

Huang Rong told him how that night after her father threatened Guo Jing's life she had jumped into the lake. After hiding for some time she figured out her father must have left, so she came back to the village. She saw Guo Jing was safe and sound and was greatly comforted; but recalling how she had been so harsh with her father she felt really bad. The next morning she saw Guo Jing and Yang Kang heading north to Beijing; thereupon she preceded them and arranged for meals along the way.

They talked all through the night in the warm sixth month's weather. The weather was pleasant and Huang Rong's heart was happy; after a while she became sleepy, her speech became fuzzy and not too long afterward fell asleep against Guo Jing's chest; her jade-white skin felt cool and her breath blew softly. Guo Jing was afraid he might awaken her, so he sat motionless against the willow tree and after a while he too dozed off.

Guo Jing did not know how long he slept, but by the time he opened his eyes he could hear the birds chirping merrily and he smelled the sweet fragrance of the wild flowers. The sun was rising; but Huang Rong was still asleep. With her eyebrows creased, her ruddy complexion, her graceful smile, she looked like she was having a sweet dream.

"Let her sleep a bit longer; I must not make any noise," Guo Jing thought. He looked like he was counting her long eyelashes when suddenly a voice was heard, coming from about twenty feet to his left.

"I found the Eldest Miss Cheng's room; it is on the second floor of the building surrounded by a flower garden behind the Tong Ren pawnshop," the voice said.

“Good! We will work tonight,” another voice replied, it sounded like an older man. Both men spoke in low voices, but in the quietness of the morning Guo Jing could hear every single word clearly. He was startled; they sounded like some ‘flower picking thieves – rapists’ [cai hua yin zei], naturally he could not let them do all kinds of evil things.

Suddenly Huang Rong opened her eyes; she leaped out of Guo Jing’s arms and called out, “Jing ge ge, catch me!” She ran toward a big tree. Initially Guo Jing was perplexed, but Huang Rong kept beckoning him to come. Finally he understood. They were pretending to be a young couple playing hide-and-seek in the morning. He pursued her while laughing and joking loudly, intentionally made his footsteps heavy to conceal his lightness kungfu.

The two men were not expecting anybody else to be around that early in the morning. They were startled, but upon seeing a young man and a young woman noisily playing, their suspicions vanished. However, they did not continue talking and left immediately.

Huang Rong and Guo Jing could see their backs. They were dressed in rags and looked like they were beggars.

“Jing ge ge, what do you think they are going to do to that Eldest Miss Cheng?” Huang Rong asked after they had walked far enough.

“Most likely not a good thing,” Guo Jing answered. “Do you think we should help her?”

“For sure,” Huang Rong answered with a smile. “Only I don’t know if they belong to Hong Qigong’s clan or not?”

“I don’t think so,” Guo Jing said. “But then Qigong said that all beggars under the heaven are in his care ... Hmm ... perhaps those two are impostors.”

"There are tens of thousands beggars in the world; certainly some of them have turned bad. I don't care how good Qigong is, he will not be able to manage each and every one of them. Looks like these two are the bad ones. Hong Qigong has been so kind to us that it is impossible to ever repay him. I think he will like it if we take care of these bad ones."

"You are right," Guo Jing agreed. Even though he was a little bit tired, the thought of repaying Qigong's kindness lifted his spirits.

"Those two men's bare legs were covered with boils. I am sure they are not false, so those two were real beggars. Other people would not disguise themselves like that," Huang Rong said.

"You really are very observant," Guo Jing said admiringly.

The young couple went back to town for some breakfast; then they walked idly down the street toward the west end of town. There they saw a very big pawnshop with four characters painted on the white wall, 'Tong Ren Pawnshop', with each character taller than an average man. Behind the shop was a garden and in the middle was a two-story building. There was a dark green bamboo curtain covering a big window on the second floor. Guo Jing and Huang Rong looked at each other and smiled. Hand-in-hand they walked away to play elsewhere.

After dinner that evening they retreated to their respective rooms for some rest and meditation. About one o'clock that night they ran toward the western part of the town; leaped up on the garden wall and saw the dark shadow of the big building. Silently they climbed to the roof and swung their bodies down from the eaves. It was a summer night, so the window was open. They looked around the big room and to

their surprise there were seven young girls, all about eighteen or nineteen years of age. One beautiful girl was sitting next to a lamp, reading. They thought she must be Miss Cheng. The other six were dressed as servant girls, all holding unsheathed weapons in their hands; they looked stern yet graceful, obviously they knew martial arts.

Guo Jing and Huang Rong initially intended to help this young woman, but, seeing she was well prepared, they thought they would wait and see. So they quietly climbed back to the roof and waited.

Not too long after they heard a faint call from outside the wall. Huang Rong immediately pulled Guo Jing and they looked down to see two shadows leaping the wall and walking toward the building. The shadows looked like the two beggars they'd seen earlier. One of the beggars whistled softly. A servant girl drew back the curtain and asked, "Have the hero brothers from the Beggar Clan arrived? Please come up." The two beggars leaped up and entered the room.

In the darkness outside Guo Jing and Huang Rong looked at each other in surprise. Earlier they thought that as soon as the beggars arrived there would be some fighting or something interesting; who would have thought that they knew each other?

Miss Cheng immediately stood up, paid her respects, and uttered some pleasantries. "Would you tell me your honorable names, please?" she asked.

"My surname is Li," the older beggar answered, "And this is my martial nephew Yu Zhao."

"So you are Senior Li and Elder Brother Yu," Miss Cheng said. "The valiant heroes of the Beggar Clan always uphold justice and are admired by the people of the martial arts

world. It really is an honor for me, young disciple, to finally meet two revered role models. Please, sit down.” Although what she said was common Jianghu pleasantries, her facial expression was shy. She paused a lot in between sentences; which showed she was not used to this kind of talk. She said ‘admired by the people of the martial arts world’ with sincerity, but sounded like she was not sure what she was talking about. When she finished speaking her head hung low and her face blushed.

Shyly she looked up toward the old beggar’s one eye and timidly asked, “Senior Hero, aren’t you the venerable ‘Serpent King of the East River’ [jiang dong she wang] Li Sheng?”

The old beggar laughed. “You have keen eyes, Miss! I have had the honor of meeting your master, the ‘Sage of Tranquility’ [qing jing san ren]. Even though we are not the best of friends, we’ve always had great respect for each other.”

Guo Jing had also heard the name ‘Sage of Tranquility’ mentioned and was delighted, “The Sage of Tranquility, Sun Bu’Er, is one of the Quanzhen Seven Masters; therefore, this Miss Cheng and those two beggars are not strangers.” He heard Miss Cheng continue, “I am very grateful to receive the Senior Hero’s aid in upholding justice. I will listen to Senior Hero’s instructions.”

“Miss, you are worth a thousand gold taels,” Li Sheng said. “But for this licentious man to look at you, even with one eye, is still too much.” Hearing this Miss Cheng’s face blushed profusely. Li Sheng continued, “Now I suggest you stay overnight in the main house, along with these honorable servants of yours. I will deal with that conceited man alone.”

"Young disciple is not skilled in martial arts, but I am not afraid of that villain," Miss Cheng said. "How can I let Senior deal with him alone?"

"Please don't say such things Miss," Li Sheng said. "Our Clan Leader Hong and your honorable founder Senior Wang were good friends; that means we belong to the same family. Why do you want to consider it otherwise?"

Actually Miss Cheng wanted to try out her own martial arts, but she listened to Li Sheng since she dare not defy him. So she bowed and said, "Then I will leave everything in Senior Li and Elder Brother Yu's capable hands." After saying that, she gracefully led her maidservants downstairs.

Li Sheng walked towards the young lady's bed, pulled back the embroidered quilt, and without taking off his shoes laid his dirty body on the sweet smelling bedding. "Go downstairs," he told Yu Zhao, "Be on guard with everyone else. Do not make any moves without my command." Yu Zhao complied. Li Sheng then hid his entire body under the blankets after extinguishing the candle beside the bed.

"Miss Cheng might not want to sleep under that blanket anymore," Huang Rong laughed inside. "The members of the Beggar Clan are just like their leader, they like to deliberately create trouble in a funny way. This matter is actually much more amusing than I originally thought."

Because there were other people standing guard, Huang Rong and Guo Jing quietly hid themselves under the eaves. About an hour later she heard the night watch sounding the signal 'knock, knock, bang, bang, bang ...' at the front of the building. It was the third hour. Then she heard a pebble fall in the flower garden.

A moment later eight people came leaping over the wall and headed straight to the second floor. They lit a lantern

briefly, enough to see the bed, then quickly extinguished it. In that very short time Guo Jing and Huang Rong could see their appearance. It turned out they were the female disciples of Ouyang Ke who dressed like men and all wore white clothing. Four of them pulled open the bed's curtain and covered Li Sheng's head with a silk hood; firmly held, they lifted him up. Two of them opened a big sack and in went the blanket with Li Sheng inside it. They quickly tightened the sack mouth and lifted up the sack. They worked swiftly and quietly in the dark, without making any noise. It seemed they were very skilled in what they were doing.

They leaped back downstairs. Guo Jing was about to make a move when Huang Rong whispered in his ear, "Let the Beggar Clan go first." Guo Jing complied. He stretched his neck and saw four female disciples carrying the sack with Li Sheng in it, while the other four were guarding the rear. Further back, about ten yards behind them, were the Beggar Clan members, each wielding a wooden staff.

Guo Jing and Huang Rong waited a moment to put some distance between them before they quietly leaped out of the garden and followed from afar. A little while later they arrived at the edge of the town. The eight women took the sack to a big house, while the four Beggar Clan members spread out to surround the building.

Huang Rong pulled Guo Jing's arm and they walked toward the back of the building; jumped over the back wall and saw that the building was actually an ancestral temple. The main hall was full of memorial tablets. On the main beam hung big banners with the deceased people's merits and honorable titles written on them. The hall was lit by four or five big red candles; and in the center sat a man waving a folding fan.



Guo Jing and Huang Rong had guessed earlier it must be Ouyang Ke's doing and they were right. They hid themselves under a window, not daring to move at all, while wondering in their hearts, "Would that Li Sheng fellow be able to fight him?"

They saw the eight women entering the hall and one said, "Young Master, Miss Cheng is here." Ouyang Ke sneered coldly. He looked outside and said, "Friends, you have been so kind to visit, why not come in and introduce yourselves?"

Hiding on top of the wall, the Beggar Clan members knew they had been found out, but without Li Sheng's command they did not dare to make any noises.

Ouyang Ke turned his head and looked at the sack. "I did not expect such a beautiful lady as you would be so easily invited to come here." He walked slowly forward, waving his folding fan slowly. When he folded the fan, it resembled an iron pen.

Huang Rong and Guo Jing saw his hand movements and his expression; they were shocked. It seemed Ouyang Ke had already discovered that an enemy was hiding inside that sack and was going to strike.

Huang Rong instantly put three steel needles into her hand, aimed toward the fan; ready to strike if Li Sheng was in danger. Suddenly there were swishing sounds and a couple of sleeve-arrows flew toward Ouyang Ke's chest. They were released by a beggar who appeared on the windowsill. They also had seen the danger threatening Li Sheng and launched a pre-emptive strike.

Ouyang Ke moved his left hand sideways, his index and middle fingers pinched one arrow, his ring and little fingers pinched the other, with a 'crack' sound the two arrows became four pieces.

The Beggars saw this and were amazed. "Martial Uncle Li, come out!" Yu Zhao called. He had not even finished shouting when the sack was ripped open; out came two blades followed by Li Zheng rolling on the floor. He used the sack as a shield and quickly stood up.

Li Sheng knew Ouyang Ke was a fierce opponent and he was not sure he could defeat him; that was the reason he wanted to attack him by surprise by hiding inside the sack. Who would have thought that Ouyang Ke would foil his plan?

"A beautiful lady turned into a beggar. That was a good sack trick!" Ouyang Ke laughed.

Li Sheng ignored his remark. "This city has lost four girls in three days. All were your doing, I presume?" he countered.

"This Baoying County is certainly not a poor area, how did a law enforcement officer turn into a beggar?" Ouyang Ke smirked.

Li Sheng remained calm. "I am not begging for food here," he answered. "But I heard yesterday that four adolescent girls suddenly vanished without a trace. My curiosity was piqued, so I took a look."

Ouyang Ke reluctantly said, "Actually those girls are not exceptional; since you want them and considering we are the people of the martial arts world, I'd like to give them to you. Beggars usually eat dead crabs; so I am sure you will treat these four girls as your treasures." He waved his right hand, and several female disciples of his went inside to get the four girls. The girls' clothes were unkempt, their faces thin and pale and their eyes red from crying.

Li Sheng was outraged to see this. He loudly shouted, "What is your honorable name? Whose disciple are you?"

Ouyang Ke still maintained his carefree attitude. "My surname is Ouyang. What is it that you want, my friend?" he nonchalantly answered.

"I want to fight you!" Li Sheng roared.

"Nothing could be better!" Ouyang Ke replied. "Please start!"

"Good!" Li Sheng shouted and moved his right hand. Just before he struck a white shadow flashed with a gust of wind. He was very shocked and leaped up immediately, but his neck was scratched nonetheless. Luckily he was swift, if not; his neck would have a hole in it.

Li Sheng was an eight-bag disciple of his clan; a highly respected position. His martial arts were strong and the beggars in Liangzhe area came to him for advice. In short, he was one of the Beggar Clan's elite fighters; who would have thought that he was nearly injured in just one stance. His face flushed with anger and embarrassment. Without turning his body he launched his hand backward.

"He knows the 'Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms'," whispered Huang Rong. Guo Jing nodded.

Ouyang Ke could see this move was fierce and did not dare to meet it head-on; he jumped sideways. By this time Li Sheng had turned his body around and stepped forward. He lifted both hands in front of his chest and with a loud cry pushed them forward.

This time it was Guo Jing who whispered into Huang Rong's ear, "Is that move from the 'Wandering Strides' fists technique [xiao yao you quan fa]?" Huang Rong nodded; but she noticed that Li Sheng's movements were heavy and not elegant like the 'Wandering Strides' should be executed.

Ouyang Ke saw Li Sheng's step was steady and his hands were proficient at launching wonderful moves; he did not dare to act casual and underestimate his opponent any longer. He slipped his folding fan into his waist and quick as a flash launched a counterattack toward Li Sheng's shoulder.

Li Sheng parried with the 'Begging for Rice' move [fan lai shen shou], still from the 'Wandering Strides' fists technique. Ouyang Ke parried with his left hand, which forced Li Sheng to lift his right arm; Ouyang Ke swiftly moved toward Li Sheng's back and stretched both hands with all fingers forming two claws attacking Li Sheng's vital 'Sleeveless Garment' [bei xin] acupoints.

Huang Rong and Guo Jing were startled, "That move is difficult to defend against."

By that time the rest of the Beggar Clan members had entered the hall. They saw Li Sheng was in grave danger and were rushing to help.

Li Sheng could hear the wind behind his back and felt the claws almost touching his clothes. Again he launched his hand backward using the 'Divine Dragon Swings its Tail' [shen long bai wei] from the Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms'. The stance came from the trigram, 'to tread on' which is part of the Yi Jing [Book of Changes]. The master who created the 'Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms' actually named the stance 'Treading on the Tiger's Tail' [lu hu wei]. It was a more powerful description compared to 'Attacking the Tiger from Behind' because if one steps on the tiger's tail, it will no doubt turn around and attack furiously. However, the later generation felt that this description in the Yi Jing was too soft and not pleasing to the tongue. Thus, they changed it to the 'Divine Dragon Swings its Tail'.

Ouyang Ke did not dare to meet this attack head-on, so he flexed his body and jumped back.

“A very close call!” Li Sheng said in his heart. He turned his body around to face his opponent again. His martial arts were inferior to Ouyang Ke’s exquisite moves. They had fought thirty or forty moves and already his life was threatened five or six times. Fortunately he could always use the ‘Divine Dragon Swings its Tail’ to get out of trouble.

“Looks like Hong Qigong only passed on this single move to him,” Huang Rong whispered. Guo Jing nodded. He recalled the time when Hong Qigong passed on to him the ‘Proud Dragon Show Remorse’ and he fought Liang Ziwen using this single move over and over. Later on Hong Qigong taught him a total of fifteen moves, while this important figure in the Beggar Clan only knew one move. His heart swelled with gratitude toward Hong Qigong.

In the meantime Ouyang Ke had increased the intensity of his attacks and step-by-step he forced Li Sheng into a corner. Earlier Ouyang Ke sent his fierce attacks without any particular target, but now his moves were intended to prevent Li Sheng from turning around and launching his backward palm. Li Sheng understood his intentions very well, so he worked hard to step back into the middle of the room.

Suddenly Ouyang Ke let out a long laugh; he whirled the fist straight up from below hitting Li Sheng’s chin. Li Sheng stuttered in pain and cried out in alarm. He tried to stretch his hand to counterattack but he was a split second too late. Ouyang Ke’s fist had struck its target. Li Sheng was hit five or six times on the head and chest. He felt dizzy and his body weak as he wobbled and fell to the floor.

The Beggar Clan people rushed to help but Ouyang Ke turned around, grabbed two of the front most attackers and threw them to the wall. They fainted immediately. The rest of the beggars did not dare continue.

“What, did you think that a bunch of stinky beggars would deceive me so easily?” Ouyang Ke sneered. He clapped his hands and two female disciples came out dragging a young woman along. Her hands were tied behind her back, her face forlorn and tears flowed down her cheeks; it was none other than Miss Cheng.

Everybody, including Huang Rong and Guo Jing, was shocked and baffled.

Ouyang Ke waved his hand and his disciples took Miss Cheng back inside. With a smug expression he said, “While the old beggar went into the sack, I worked downstairs capturing Miss Cheng and came back here immediately to wait for the rest of you.”

The beggars looked at each other in blank dismay; they’d lost this bout big time.

Ouyang Ke casually waved his fan and mocked, “The Beggar Clan’s name is well-known throughout the world. Today I have seen it with my own eyes; it’s a fame that will make people laugh until their teeth fall out of their mouths! Your special skills of stealing chickens, stroking dogs, begging for food, catching snakes, I have seen them all. Now, do you still dare to meddle in your Young Master’s business? I am willing to spare this old beggar’s life, but I must take his two lights as a souvenir.” After saying that, he stretched out two fingers toward Li Sheng’s eyes.

“Hold it!” a voice suddenly called out. A man leaped into the hall and immediately sent an attack toward Ouyang Ke.

Ouyang Ke sensed the swiftness and fierceness of the attack; he moved sideways to evade, but could not get out of the wind. His body shook and he was forced to draw back two steps. He could not help but be inwardly startled. "Since I left the Western Regions I have fought many skilled masters; who is this man who has an unexpectedly high martial arts skill?" He turned his eyes toward the newcomer and once again he was startled. He had fought Guo Jing before at the Zhao Palace and his martial arts were only average; how did his palm carry such profound strength just now?

"You have committed all kinds of evil, but instead of repenting you wanted to injure this good man. Do you really not have any consideration for the heroes of Jianghu?" Guo Jing scolded.

Ouyang Ke thought that Guo Jing's last attack was just a fluke. He looked down on Guo Jing, "Are you one of those 'heroes'?" he mockingly asked.

"I do not dare to call myself a hero," Guo Jing answered. "With all due respect, I am asking you to release Miss Cheng and return to the west immediately."

"And what if I don't want to listen to your childish request?" Ouyang Ke smirked.

Before Guo Jing had a chance to reply, Huang Rong called from outside the window, "Jing ge ge, just punch that bastard!"

When Ouyang Ke heard Huang Rong's voice, his spirits were shaken. "Miss Huang, you want me to release Miss Cheng, that is easy, just as long as you follow me wherever I go. Not only Miss Cheng, but I will also release all my female disciples; moreover, I will promise you not to take another female disciple. Wouldn't that be good?"

Huang Rong leaped inside the hall, smiling as she said, "That is very good! We are going to tour the Western Regions. Jing ge ge, are you coming?"

Ouyang Ke shook his head, "No, I want you to come with me. I don't want this stinky kid to come along," he said, still smiling.

Huang Rong was angry, her palm slapped backward. "You dare to slur him? You are the stinky one!" she shouted loudly.

Ouyang Ke was mesmerized with Huang Rong's gracefulness and her sweet smile while talking to him. She looked so innocent yet free. His spirit was enthralled. Who would have thought that she would abruptly turn hostile? He was not on guard against her and Huang Rong used the exquisite move from the 'Peach Blossom Divine Sword Palm', the ultimate in Peach Blossom Island palm techniques. His left cheek was slapped. Fortunately Huang Rong did not use her full strength, but his face burned with pain nonetheless.

"Bah!" Ouyang Ke spat. His left hand suddenly stretched out toward Huang Rong's breast. Huang Rong did not elude him but threw both hands toward the top of his head. Ouyang Ke was lascivious and seeing that Huang Rong did not move, he was delighted. Ignoring the blow on his head his hand caressed her breast. Who would have thought that as soon as his fingers touched her clothing he felt a stabbing pain. It suddenly dawned on him, "She is wearing the soft hedgehog armor." Luckily he was being frivolous and had not used much strength. Quickly he lifted his arm to parry her blow.

"It's not easy for you to hit me," Huang Rong smiled. "I can hit you, but you can't hit me."



Ouyang Ke was exasperated; he could not get angry with Huang Rong, so he directed his anger toward Guo Jing. "Let me kill this kid first; I hope then her feelings toward him will die," he thought. While his eyes were fixed on Huang Rong, his leg flew backward towards Guo Jing's chest. This leg movement was swift and ruthless. It was the 'Western Poison' Ouyang Feng's unique family skill. It was difficult to fend against. Once the leg hit its target, the ribs would fracture in towards the lung.

Guo Jing did not have enough time to jump back, so he turned his body around and launched a backward palm. With a loud crash Guo Jing's palm hit Ouyang Ke's leg just as Ouyang Ke's leg almost simultaneously hit Guo Jing's chest. Both men felt pain that seared to the bone. They turned their bodies around facing each other and stared at each other angrily; then they immediately attacked each other again.

The Beggar Clan people were surprised and thought, "This move obviously is Li Sheng's unique skill, the 'Divine Dragon Swings its Tail', how come this young man can use it? Moreover, his movement was superior to that of Li Sheng." By now they had already pulled Li Sheng, who had come to his senses, to the side. He also recognized not only the 'Divine Dragon Swings its Tail', but other stances as well. He saw Guo Jing's moves were exquisite and powerful; he was amazed. "The 'Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms' is Clan Leader Hong's special skill. Because I had no regard for my own life and rendered a great service, the leader generously rewarded me with one stance. Where did this youth learn the full set of eighteen stances?" Obviously he did not realize Guo Jing only knew fifteen stances.

Ouyang Ke was also amazed. He secretly admired Guo Jing's progress. "How could this kid's martial arts improve so much in just two months?"

In a short time they already exchanged about forty moves. Guo Jing had repeatedly used his fifteen stances several times. It was enough for him to defend himself; but in all honesty he had to admit that Ouyang Ke's martial arts were several levels above his. He realized he would not win.

Another ten or so moves later Ouyang Ke changed his tactics. He swiftly moved in all directions to divert Guo Jing's attention then he launched an attack from an unexpected direction. Guo Jing tried hard to fend it off but his left hip was kicked. He stepped backward limping. Luckily his stances were concentrated in his palms, so he could still launch his fifteen moves in succession.

Ouyang Ke did not dare to press the situation for a while. He tried to force an opening in Guo Jing's defense line. About a dozen or so moves later, he did see an opening and immediately launched an attack. Guo Jing had finished all fifteen moves and was about to repeat the whole set. After the fifteenth stance, the 'Seeing the Dragon in the Fields' [jian long zai tian], he could have launched the first stance, the 'Proud Dragon Shows Remorse' [kang long you hui]; but he could also repeat the last stance, the 'Seeing the Dragon in the Fields '. His mind was not quick enough as he pondered, "Shall I repeat from the beginning, or shall I reverse the order?" This slight hesitation was enough for Ouyang Ke. He immediately took advantage of this small flaw and attacked Guo Jing's shoulder.

Guo Jing was taken aback; he did not have any chance to think which one of the fifteen stances he could use to parry that attack, so in reflex he stepped backward and slapped his opponent's hand. It was a move that followed no martial arts principles; it was a move without a move. It took Ouyang Ke by surprise and his arm was squarely hit. Ouyang Ke was shocked; he leaped back and immediately

examined his arm. Luckily, even though it hurt, it was not broken.

Guo Jing was delighted with this unexpected result. He thought, "I realized there are three areas on my body that are not protected well: my shoulder, left hip and right waist. If only I could develop more stances using both hands ..." His mind was still reeling as Ouyang Ke launched another attack.

Guo Jing was not the smartest kid in the country. Even if he painstakingly racked his brain for ten days or two weeks, he would not necessarily come up with even half of a new move. Right now he was engaged in fierce combat, how would he have a chance to think? All he could do was clumsily modify whatever principles he had learned from the 'Dragon Palms' just to protect these three areas, his shoulder, left hip and right waist.

Ouyang Ke was anxious. "His stances are limited, and given enough time, I am sure I can gain the upper hand. Where did the three additional stances come from?" he thought. He did not know that Guo Jing's three additional moves were actually useless; but he was a little bit wary since he was hit before. He slowed his pace and concentrating his strength on defense, carefully studied Guo Jing's new moves. After a while he could see the flaw. "Right! He has not mastered these moves yet, that was the reason he did not use them at the beginning," he thought. While still moving his body around he thrust his left hand to divert Guo Jing's attention and at the same time swung his right leg straight toward Guo Jing's left hip.

Guo Jing was not able to use his three self-developed stances to their full extent yet. Suddenly seeing his opponent attack his weak point, he was nervous. As he was

launching a palm, he suddenly retracted it halfway and diverted his palm to parry his opponent's kick.

Huang Rong was secretly disappointed. "To hesitate in a match like this is truly martial arts biggest taboo. In this one single move Jing ge ge has wasted seven or eight opportunities. Not only that, even if he won't be able to injure the enemy, he should be able to defend himself. By turning his palm around like that, he actually made the flaw bigger," she reasoned. She knew for sure that Ouyang Ke had put all his strength into that kick and Guo Jing might not be able to parry it. Immediately seven or eight steel needles flew swiftly from her hand.

Ouyang Ke quickly drew the folding fan from his waist and in one fluid motion opened it and waved it gently to block the needles. He was sure all needles were knocked down so he did not slow down his kick toward Guo Jing. He was confident Guo Jing would get hit hard and fall to the floor; but then he felt a slight numbness as though the acupoint above his ankle was sealed. His kick did not stop, but it had lost all its strength. Ouyang Ke leaped back in great surprise. "Which meddler was brave enough to backstab your Young Master?" he fumed, "Come out if you have guts ..."

But before he finished he heard a noise from above and something flew his way. He lifted his hand to block that thing, but it came too fast. Before he knew it something had entered his mouth. It was a little bit salty and hard. He was startled and frightened. Quickly he spat that thing out. As it turned out it was a chicken bone.

Nervously he looked above him, but at that precise moment more debris came down on him. He quickly leaped sideways while spitting the dust from his mouth. Just as he opened his mouth several chicken bones came hitting his teeth.

They were not knocked out but it was painful! Ouyang Ke was wild with rage. Suddenly he saw something fly down from a shadow on the roof beam above; he immediately launched a palm to strike that something. He managed to knock it down to the floor only to see that something was a half-eaten chicken foot. Then he heard the shadow on the beam explode in laughter. "How is the beggar's stealing chickens skill?"

Huang Rong and Guo Jing leapt with joy as soon as they heard his voice. "Qigong!" they shouted together.

Everybody looked up and saw Hong Qigong sitting on the roof beam, his legs spread and with half of a chicken in his hand, which he ate enthusiastically. The Beggar Clan people bowed and open their mouths together, "Clan Leader! We wish you well Senior."

Ouyang Ke saw it was indeed Hong Qigong and his heart sank. "If what he threw at me was not chicken bones but projectiles, I would be dead by now. Real men are not afraid of defeat; the most important thing now is escaping." He bowed and said, "Uncle Hong, your nephew kowtows to you." His mouth said 'kowtow' but he did not kneel.

Hong Qigong was still chewing the chicken. "Are you not returning to the west? You have committed evil acts here, do you want to end your little life in the 'Central Plain' [zhong yuan]?" he asked indistinctly.

"In the Central Plain Uncle Hero is invincible," Ouyang Ke replied. "As long as Uncle Hero shows mercy and did not come here to bully the young and the weak, your young nephew has nothing to fear. My uncle has instructed me that if I ever see Uncle Hong I should be respectful to you. He warned me about the difference between our skill levels and that Junior simply could not even touch you. Should I

insist on trying I would be the laughingstock of all the heroes of the world."

Hong Qigong laughed heartily and said, "You flatter me and try to prevent me from fighting you. But there are actually a lot of people on the Central Plain who want to kill you. I don't have to move my finger if I really want you dead. Earlier you said that you have seen my skills of stealing chickens, stroking dogs, begging for food and catching snakes and you belittled those skills, did you not?"

Ouyang Ke hastily answered, "Your young nephew was not aware this old hero is Uncle Hong's disciple. It was very disrespectful of me. I beg Uncle and this old hero's forgiveness."

Hong Qigong leaped down from the beam. "You called him 'the old hero' but he was defeated by you. Aren't you the hero then? Ha ... ha ... aren't you ashamed?"

Ouyang Ke was angry, but knew his martial arts were too far below Hong Qigong's so he did not dare to say anything wrong. He suppressed his anger and did not make a sound.

"Your skills were imparted by that old Western Poison and you are thinking of running amuck in the Central Plain. Humph ... did you really think I am already dead?" Hong Qigong said.

"Uncle holds the same rank of honor as my uncle; Junior will have to listen to Uncle's instructions," Ouyang Ke said.

"Is that so?" Hong Qigong said. "You are saying that I've put you on the spot; that the older bully the younger?" Ouyang Ke did not say anything, which was the same as agreeing to what Hong Qigong was saying.

“Even though the Old Beggar is the leader of all beggars, old and young alike, not all beggars are my disciples,” Hong Qigong continued. “This man surnamed Li has learned a superficial amount of my martial arts; how could he be regarded as my successor? His ‘Wandering Strides’ fist technique has not yet reached perfection. You belittled my stealing chickens and stroking dogs skill, humph ... if the old beggar really takes a disciple, he wouldn’t be inferior to you.”

“Naturally,” Ouyang Ke agreed. “Uncle Hong’s disciple would be much stronger than your nephew. But your martial arts skill is too high; it wouldn’t be easy for anybody to learn.”

“Your mouth is sweet,” Hong Qigong said, “But I am sure you are scolding me in your heart.”

“Your nephew does not dare,” Ouyang Ke answered.

“Qigong, don’t believe his lies,” Huang Rong quipped. “He scolds you in his heart all right and he scolds you really bad. He said that although your martial arts are not bad, it only benefits you; you don’t have the ability to teach. Even if you teach your stealing chickens and stroking dogs’ skills to the end of your life, nobody would be able to learn it to perfection.”

Hong Qigong just stared at her. He snorted and mumbled, “This little girl knows how to provoke me.” He turned his head and said, “So? This kid dares to scold me?” Suddenly he stretched out one hand and, quick as lighting, he snatched the folding fan from Ouyang Ke’s hand. He unfolded the fan and saw some painted peonies and two characters ‘Xu Xi’. He did not know that Xu Xi was a poet from the Northern Song Dynasty. Although the peonies were beautifully painted, he still said, “Not good!” There

were several lines of characters written on the fan and at the end was a signature, 'Young Master of the White Camel Mountain' [bai tuo shan shao zhu]. It was Ouyang Ke's handwriting.

"What do you think of these characters?" Hong Qigong asked Huang Rong.

Huang Rong raised her eyebrows and said, "Very crude. But what do you expect? A spoiled rich kid like him wouldn't know how to write. I bet he hired a pawnshop clerk to write those characters."

Ouyang Ke prided himself on being both a martial arts and literature expert, which was actually not too far from the truth. Upon hearing Huang Rong's words he was really angry. He shot a glare towards her, only to see in the candlelight the corners of her eyes showed a very faint smile. She looked so sweet and innocent that his anger vanished into thin air.

Hong Qigong spread the fan in his hand, raised it, and wiped his mouth with it. He had just eaten a chicken, so his mouth was greasy. As soon as he did that, the painting and calligraphy were completely destroyed. Then he casually crumpled the fan, made a paper ball and tossed it to the floor.

Other people would think nothing of it, but not Ouyang Ke; his fan's spines were made of steel. The fan was his weapon. It was a demonstration of profound internal energy. He was terrified.

"If I personally fight you, you will die unsatisfied. So I am going to take a disciple and let him fight with you," Hong Qigong said.



Ouyang Ke pointed to Guo Jing. "This fellow has fought with me for dozens of stances. If Uncle Hong had not appeared, I would have gained the upper hand. Brother Guo, don't you agree?" he said.

Guo Jing nodded his head, "I might lose." Ouyang Ke smiled with satisfaction.

Hong Qigong looked up and laughed. "Jing'er, are you my disciple?" he asked.

Guo Jing recalled he kowtowed to Hong Qigong, but Hong Qigong returned those kowtows. "Junior is not fortunate enough to be your disciple," he quickly replied.

"Did you hear?" Hong Qigong asked Ouyang Ke.

Ouyang Ke was dissatisfied. "You can't fool me; where did this kid's exquisite palms come from?" he asked.

Hong Qigong turned toward Guo Jing. "If I don't make you my disciple, that little girl brat will not let me die peacefully. She will pester me with hundreds of evil schemes forever. I guess the old beggar has to admit defeat. All right, bow to me; I'll take you as my disciple," he said.

Guo Jing was ecstatic. Quickly he dropped to his knees and quickly kowtowed several times while calling out, "Master!" That day at 'Returning Cloud Manor' he had recounted to his six masters how Hong Qigong had taught him most of the 'Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms'. The Six Freaks of Jiangnan were very happy and all said it was a pity this highly skilled extraordinary character of the Wulin world was not willing to take Guo Jing as his disciple. They told him that if Hong Qigong happened to reveal his willingness to take him, Guo Jing should accept without reservation.

Huang Rong was even happier. She smiled broadly and said, "Qigong, I have helped you find a very fine disciple. My contribution is not small. Starting today you will have somebody you can call your successor. How will you thank me?"

Hong Qigong made a face at her, "Kiss my ass!" Then he turned to Guo Jing and said, "Stupid kid [sha xiao zi - it's a vulgar term, lit. foolish/dumb etc.], let me first teach you three stances." He immediately taught Guo Jing the last three stances of the 'Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms' right in front of everyone. Of course, compared to Guo Jing's own three desperately-brewed stances, these moves were a world apart.

Ouyang Ke said to himself, "This old beggar's martial arts are outstanding, but he is not too smart. He is concentrating on teaching his disciple, totally forgetting that I am standing here, watching." With rapt attention he watched Guo Jing's every move. But he did not see anything extraordinary. Sometimes Hong Qigong whispered something into Guo Jing's ear. He guessed it must be the theory behind these three moves. Sometimes Guo Jing would nod his head, but most other times he just stood there, staring blankly or shook his head. Hong Qigong would repeat what he just said until Guo Jing reluctantly nodded his head; obviously he did not fully comprehend the theory. "This guy is really stupid," he thought, "This short period of time is not enough for him to learn the three stances. I might as well take the opportunity to study them."

In the meantime Hong Qigong had Guo Jing practice them six or seven times. "Good, smart disciple," he said. "You have mastered about fifty percent of these three stances. Now go and beat this lecherous thief for me."

“Yes,” Guo Jing answered and moved forward two steps and launched a palm toward Ouyang Ke. Ouyang Ke slanted his body and counterattacked with a fist. Thus the two engaged in a fight again.

The secret of the ‘Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms’ lies in the exact timing of energy exertion. The moves themselves were quite simple. That was the reason that although Liang Ziweng, Mei Chaofeng and Ouyang Ke’s martial arts were higher than Guo Jing’s, he was able to fight them without losing ground. Just a moment ago Ouyang Ke was watching Hong Qigong pass on the three stances to Guo Jing and he knew Guo Jing had not fully comprehended the moves while he himself had memorized the stances. Yet, now that he was fighting Guo Jing, he found it difficult to overcome those three stances.

Guo Jing, on the other hand, had now mastered the complete set of the ‘Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms’. He was able to use it from head to tail and back to head again. The fierceness of the original fifteen moves he had already mastered was greatly increased.

Ouyang Ke had used four different kinds of martial arts, yet he could only match Guo Jing without being able to gain the upper hand. Dozens of moves later he started to get anxious. “If I don’t use my family’s unique skills I may lose,” he thought. “I was trained by my uncle since childhood. How come I cannot defeat the old beggar’s disciple who received instructions just a moment ago? I am afraid the old beggar will look down on my uncle.”

A dozen or so moves later Guo Jing raised his hand to parry Ouyang Ke’s fist which suddenly turned around and hit Guo Jing’s skull from behind. Guo Jing was stunned. He ducked to avoid a blow while simultaneously throwing a fist slanting upward. Ouyang Ke stepped sideways and sent another fist.

Guo Jing did not dare to parry that fist; he dodged to the right. Who would have thought that Ouyang Ke's arm would suddenly move like a whip! Guo Jing clearly saw it was aiming at his left side but suddenly twisted to the right and struck Guo Jing's shoulder.

Guo Jing was hit three times in a short period of time. These three hits were heavy; he was anxious for he had no idea how to deal with them. "Jing'er, stop!" Hong Qigong called out, "Let's just admit defeat this time."

Guo Jing leaped back about ten feet; he felt pain in the parts hit. To Ouyang Ke he said, "Your martial arts are really brilliant; turning your arm around like that was really odd." Ouyang Ke was proud of himself; he cast a boastful look toward Huang Rong.

Hong Qigong said, "The Old Poison raises snakes for a living; this set of the 'Snake's Flexible Skin' [ruan pi she] fists technique must be developed from the movements of venomous snakes'. It was brilliant. The old beggar has not been able to devise a method to overcome it. Just consider yourself lucky. Now, get out of my way!"

Ouyang Ke's heart turned cold. "Uncle warned me a thousand times not to use this 'Spirit Snake Fist' [ling she quan] unless in an extremely dangerous situation. Today I have let the old beggar see it. If my uncle finds out, I will be in big trouble." His self-satisfaction disappeared almost immediately. He bowed toward Hong Qigong and walked out the temple.

"Hold on a second! I have something to say," Huang Rong called out. Ouyang Ke halted his steps; his heart beat faster. But Huang Rong did not pay any attention to him. She turned toward Hong Qigong and bowed respectfully. "Qigong," she said. "You have to accept two disciples today.

Good things come in pairs; you have accepted a male disciple, now you must accept a female one. Otherwise I won't let you off easily."

Hong Qigong shook his head. "I have already made an exception by accepting one disciple," he smiled. "The old beggar doesn't want to talk about it. Moreover, your father is also highly skilled in martial arts, how could he let you take the old beggar as your master?"

Huang Rong pretended to be suddenly enlightened. "So, you are afraid of my father!" she exclaimed. Hong Qigong was provoked, but he was actually very fond of her. "Me? Afraid of your father?" he said with a straight face. "All right, I'll take you as my disciple. I want to see if Old Heretic Huang will eat me alive."

Huang Rong smiled. "You've said it, you can't take it back," she said. "You know, my father oftentimes remarked that after Wang Chongyang died, amongst the martial experts in this world, only you and he were the two people that counted. The Southern Emperor and the rest of them are not even in his books. I am sure father will love that I take you as my master. Master, how does a beggar catch a snake? Please teach me this skill first."

Hong Qigong was not sure he knew her intentions, but he did know the young girl was smart. She must have had some clever trick up her sleeve. So he explained simply, "Grab the snake seven inches from its head. Use your two fingers like a pair of tongs. As long as you pinch the snake at seven inches, no matter how venomous the snake is, it won't be able to move."

"What if the snake is very big?" Huang Rong asked.

"Lure it to bite your left hand, then, use your right hand to hit it at seven inches," Hong Qigong answered.

“Do you have to be extremely quick?” Huang Rong asked again.

“Of course,” Hong Qigong replied. “You have to put some ointment on your left hand, so even if it gets bitten by the snake you won’t get hurt.”

Huang Rong nodded. She winked at Hong Qigong and asked, “Master, please apply the ointment to my hand.”

Catching snakes was the Beggar Clan’s specialty. Hong Qigong had never used any ointment or antidote; he would simply beat the snake with his stick. But, seeing Huang Rong’s meaningful glance, he took the scarlet gourd from his back, which actually contained some wine, and applied the wine to both of Huang Rong’s palms.

Huang Rong sniffed her palms, made a face, and said to Ouyang Ke, “Hey, I am now a world famous beggar, the Old Hero Hong’s disciple. I am asking for a lesson on the ‘Snake’s Flexible Skin’ from you. But I must warn you that my hands are full of the antidote to your poison, so you must be careful.”

“Having a match with you is exactly what I hoped for,” Ouyang Ke thought. “I don’t care what witchcraft is on your hands, as long as I don’t touch them.” So he smiled brightly and said, “I am willing to die by your hands.”

Huang Rong said, “Your other martial arts are so sloppy and ordinary, I only want to fight your stinky snake moves. If you use any other martial arts, you lose.”

“Whatever Miss says, I wouldn’t dare to disobey,” Ouyang Ke said.

Huang Rong laughed. “I can’t believe a bastard like you would have a very sweet mouth,” she said. “Watch out!” As

soon as she finished speaking her fist came flying with Hong Qigong's 'Wandering Strides' technique.

Ouyang Ke let the fist pass to his side. Huang Rong followed with her left leg kicking horizontally, while her right hand formed a hook. It was a stance from the 'Peach Blossom Divine Sword Palm', her own family heritage. Unfortunately Huang Rong was still too young and the time she spent on training was limited; however, this time her purpose was a victory, so she used whatever kungfu she knew, regardless of who passed it on to her.

Ouyang Ke saw the exquisiteness of her moves; he did not dare to be careless. His right arm extended and suddenly curved back to hit her shoulder. This move from the 'Spirit Snake Fist' was swift. His hand almost touched Huang Rong's body when he suddenly remembered that she was wearing the soft hedgehog armor. Had he proceeded, wouldn't his fist be dripping with blood?

Huang Rong quickly dodged and sent both her palms whishing toward an opening on his face. Ouyang Ke brushed his sleeve and parried her palms.

Huang Rong's body was protected by the soft hedgehog armor, her hands were covered with ointment; the only part unprotected was her face. Ouyang Ke was in a predicament; he was getting attacked without any chance to hit back. Even though the 'Spirit Snake Fist' was wonderful; he was forced to fly east and dodge west trying to elude Huang Rong's attack, while keeping himself from touching her palms. "If I hit her face to gain victory, that would be offensive to her, and if I pull her hair, I treat her rudely; other than that I can't think of anything else," he thought. But he suddenly had an idea. He stepped aside and quickly tore the corner of his sleeve; ripped it into two

parts and wrapped them around his hands. With protected hands he tried to grab Huang Rong's palms.

"You lost!" Huang Rong jumped out of the arena and called out. "That's not the 'Stinky Snake Fist'."

"Oh, I forgot," Ouyang Ke said.

"Your 'Stinky Snake Fist' is not that special, it cannot defeat Hong Qigong's disciple," Huang Rong continued. "At the Zhao Palace you defeated me, but that was because you had Liang Ziwen, Sha Tongtian, Peng Lianhu, Reverend Ling Zhi, and also that wart-headed Hou Tonghai at your side. I was overwhelmed by sheer numbers; also I did not want to get into trouble, so I admitted defeat. All right, now that we have defeated each other, let's just have a match to decide victory or defeat."

Li Sheng and the others were taken aback, they thought, "Even though this young girl's martial arts are good, she is definitely not this man's match. She won by using a trick. Why would she add something superfluous and ruin the victory? What else does she want to prove?"

Hong Qigong on the other hand fully realized that this girl was full of clever tricks; she must have something in mind to trick the enemy. So he simply smiled but did not say anything. He continued gnawing the chicken leftovers and ate noisily; like that chicken was the best food in the world.

"Why are you so serious?" Ouyang Ke laughed. "You'll win or I'll win, it doesn't make a difference. But if you really want to play, I will accompany you."

"At the Zhao Palace we were surrounded by your friends. Had I won, they would surely attack me; thus I was not willing to fight you seriously," Huang Rong said. "But now you have your friends," she pointed to the female



disciples/concubines in white, “and I also have my friends. Although you have more friends than I do, I am not afraid. Let us fight just like we did before: you may draw a circle on the ground; we will follow the same rule; whoever steps out of the circle first, loses. I have kowtowed and taken Senior Hong as my master; I also have highly skilled martial siblings, including this young man. You do not have to tie your hands behind your back as before.”

Ouyang Ke was amused. What she said was partly funny, but also, if you thought about it, it did make sense. So he planted his left foot on the floor, and used it as the axis; while his right foot was stretched three feet away. He turned around and made a circle about six feet in diameter.

The Beggar Clan people did not like him, but seeing this they could not help but secretly praise him.

Huang Rong entered the circle and said, “Are we going to fight the ‘soft’ way [‘wen’ – literary] or ‘hard’ way [‘wu’ – military, or martial arts]?”

Ouyang Ke was baffled, “You are eccentric,” he said in his heart, but his mouth asked, “How do fight the ‘soft’ way? And how do you fight the ‘hard’ way?”

“If we fight the soft way, I attack you three times, you don’t counterattack; then you attack me three times, I won’t counterattack,” Huang Rong explained. “If we fight the hard way, we can fight each other at will. You can use your ‘Dead Snake Fist’ or ‘Live Mouse Stance’, I don’t care. Whoever steps out of the circle first, loses.”

Ouyang Ke thought for a moment. “I think we’d better fight the ‘soft’ way,” he said. “That way, we can avoid injury and won’t spoil our friendship.”

"If you chose the 'hard' way, you will certainly lose," Huang Rong said. "But if we fight the 'soft' way, you still have a chance. Good! Let us fight as you wish, the 'soft' way. Do you go first, or I go first?"

How could Ouyang Ke hit her first? "Certainly ladies first," he said.

Huang Rong smiled. "You are sly! You know you will suffer a loss if you hit me first. All right, I am being generous to you; let me hit you first."

Ouyang Ke was going to say, "In that case I will hit you first." But before he could open his mouth Huang Rong had already shouted, "Watch out!" She immediately sent her palm to attack. Something flashed in her hand; as it turned out she was throwing some hidden projectiles.

Ouyang Ke saw the multitude of projectiles; normally he would use his folding fan to parry an attack like this, but his fan was crushed by Hong Qigong's hand. He could also use his long sleeve to trap the projectiles, but he'd torn his sleeves earlier. The steel needles encompassed an area about six or seven feet wide; if he leaped sideways, he would be out of the circle. He had no time to consider any other alternatives, so he leaped about ten feet vertically. The steel needles flew below him.

Huang Rong waited until he was at the peak and was falling back down before she called out, "Here comes the second attack!" Her hands launched about a hundred steel needles. It was the 'Blossoms Rain from the Sky' needle tossing technique [man tian hua yu zhi jin zhen] from Hong Qigong. She did not even try to aim and just shot the needles toward Ouyang Ke.

Even if Ouyang Ke's skills were much higher, his body was midair and there was simply no way he could avoid them. "I

am finished!" he sighed in his heart, "This girl is so vicious." Right at that moment he felt someone pulling his collar and his body moved back upward; with swishing noise the needles fell to the ground.

Ouyang Ke knew somebody must have saved him. He was thrown back to the ground. It was not too hard, but the energy behind that throw was peculiar – a sign of a highly skilled martial artist; he fell left shoulder first. Naturally he tried to stand back up, but he was unable to do so. He rolled around on the floor a bit before he finally managed to stand. He knew it must be Hong Qigong, because nobody in that vicinity had that kind of skill. He was terrified yet upset and immediately walked out the temple without saying anything. His female disciples followed.

"Master, why did you save that scoundrel?" Huang Rong asked.

Hong Qigong smiled. "His uncle is an old friend of mine. That kid has committed many disgraceful acts; he deserves to be damned. But it wouldn't be good for his uncle's face if he were injured by my hand." He patted Huang Rong on the shoulder and said, "Smart girl, you have given me much good face today. How should I reward you?"

Huang Rong stuck out her tongue. "I don't want your bamboo stick," she said.

"Even if you want it, I cannot give it to you," Hong Qigong said. "I have a mind to teach you one or two kinds of kungfu, but I am too lazy these past few days. I don't have any interest in doing anything."

"I'll prepare some good food for you to boost your interest," Huang Rong offered.

Hog Qigong's eyes lit up; but then he heaved a big sigh. "I don't have time to eat right now. What a pity, what a pity ...!" He turned to Li Sheng and the others and said, "The Beggar Clan has several matters we need to discuss internally."

Li Sheng and the others came to Guo Jing and Huang Rong, expressing their gratefulness for saving their lives. Huang Rong had cut the rope that bound Miss Cheng's hands and feet. Miss Cheng was extremely shy; she held Huang Rong's hand and quietly said her thanks. Huang Rong pointed to Guo Jing and said, "Your Eldest Martial Uncle, Priest Ma taught him kungfu, your Martial Uncles Qiu and Wang are also very fond of him, so I can say that we belong to the same family."

Miss Cheng turned her head toward Guo Jing and suddenly blushed. She lowered her head and after a while quietly stole a glance toward Guo Jing again.

Li Sheng and the others also congratulated Hong Qigong, Guo Jing and Huang Rong. They knew Qigong did not usually accept disciples; even amongst the Beggar Clan members did he rarely teach more than one or two stances. They wondered how Guo Jing and Huang Rong persuaded him so that he was willing to take them. In their hearts they envied these two.

"We are going to prepare a banquet tomorrow evening to congratulate Clan Leader on having accepted two very fine disciples," Li Sheng said.

Hong Qigong smiled, "I am afraid they won't like filthy foods, the kind we beggars eat."

"We will certainly come," Guo Jing hastily said, "Big Brother Li is a Senior Hero, Junior would very much like to know you." Li Sheng had been saved by Guo Jing; thus he kept his

eyes on this young man and listening to his humble speech he was even more delighted. He decided right then and there to befriend Guo Jing.

Hong Qigong said, "I am glad you two feel like old friends at your first meeting; but I warn you not to persuade my first disciple to be a beggar like you! You, my younger disciple, go and take Miss Cheng back home. We, the beggars are going to steal some chickens and beg for some rice." After saying these words, he left the temple followed by all the beggars. Just before leaving Li Sheng told Guo Jing that the banquet tomorrow would be held in that very same temple.

Guo Jing accompanied Huang Rong escorting Miss Cheng back home.

Miss Cheng quietly told Huang Rong her full name was Cheng Yaojia. Even though she had learned martial arts from the 'Sage of Tranquility' Sun Bu'Er, she was born to a rich family and had been pampered since her childhood. Thus, by nature, she was very shy and did not know too many people. She was very different from Huang Rong who was carefree and brave. She did not dare to say even a half word to Guo Jing. Occasionally she would steal a glance and immediately lower her head; her cheeks blushed profusely.

## Chapter 16 - The Nine Yin Manual

Translated by Frans Soetomo



*The coffin's lid opened; it turned out it had not been nailed down. There was no zombie inside; only a good-looking young girl with a pair of big*

*eyes. It was none other than Mu Nianci. Yang Kang was pleasantly surprised and quickly he held out his hand to help her out.*

Guo Jing and Huang Rong left the Cheng's residence and were very tired since they have not had any sleep that night. They had wanted to go back to the inn to rest, but suddenly heard the sound of hoof beats galloping fast from the south heading north. The sound was coming nearer but suddenly it stopped. Huang Rong's curiosity was piqued, "There must be something unusual happening. It sounds interesting." Utilizing her lightness kungfu she immediately went to take a look. Guo Jing followed closely.

To their surprise, what they saw was Yang Kang standing at the roadside, holding a horse's reins and talking to Ouyang Ke. Guo and Huang did not want to come any closer because they did not want to be detected. They hid themselves quite a distance away. Those two spoke in low voices so all Huang Rong could hear was bits and pieces. Ouyang Ke mentioned 'Yue Fei' and 'Lin'an government office', while Yang Kang did say 'my father'. Huang Rong was curious, she wanted to go nearer, but at that moment Ouyang Ke cupped his fists and headed east along with all of his female disciples/concubines.

Yang Kang stayed behind. He stared blankly for a while; then let out a long sigh and mounted his horse. "Xian Di [Worthy Brother], I am here," Guo Jing called. Yang Kang heard his voice and was startled but stopped his horse anyway. "Elder Brother, you are here as well?" he replied.

"I ran into Miss Huang and we fought Ouyang Ke, that's why we were delayed," Guo Jing explained. Yang Kang's face turned red; he felt uneasy since he wasn't sure if Guo Jing heard his conversation with Ouyang Ke. Guo Jing's face

remained calm; so Yang Kang felt better. "This man does not know how to deceive," he thought, "He wouldn't be this calm if he had heard me."

"Elder Brother," he said, "shall we hurry up and continue our trip tonight, or shall we spend the night here? Will Miss Huang go to Beijing with us?"

"It's not I who goes with you, it is you who follows us," Huang Rong said.

"What's the difference?" Guo Jing smiled. "Let us go back to the ancestral temple and have some rest. Tomorrow evening we will enjoy the Beggar Clan's banquet and then we can continue our trip."

Then the three walked back to the temple. Huang Rong lit a candle. As she carried the candle she picked up the needles she shot out minutes ago. At this time of the year the weather was got hotter, so they took down the doors and took them outside. They intended to sleep in the courtyard.

Just before they fell asleep, the sound of horses' hoof beats could be faintly heard from the distance. They tilted their heads to listen. The sound was coming fast and sounded like it was more than one horse.

"Three horses in front, pursued by more than ten people," Huang Rong guessed. Guo Jing literally grew up on horseback; he knew exactly the number of the horses.

"There are sixteen pursuers altogether," he said. "Well, well, well ... what do you know?"

"What?" Huang Rong asked.

"The three at the front are on Mongolian horses, but the pursuers are not," Guo Jing answered. "What in the world are Mongolian horses doing in this area?" he wondered.



Huang Rong tugged Guo Jing's hand and they walked outside the temple gate. Suddenly a swishing sound was heard as an arrow flew above their heads. The three riders rushed towards the temple. An arrow flew from the pursuers and hit the last horse's thigh. The horse uttered a sad neigh as its leg buckled. The rider's equestrian skill was superb; he managed to leap clear just before the horse hit the ground. It seemed the rider did not know any lightness kungfu and his steps were heavy. The other two riders stopped their horses and turned back.

"I am all right," shouted the one now on foot. "Quickly, go! I'll try to slow the enemy!"

"I will help you with the enemy. Fourth Prince, you go ahead," shouted one of the other two.

"How can you do that?" asked the Fourth Prince.

Those three were speaking Mongolian. Guo Jing, as he listened, thought he knew those voices. They sounded like Tolui, Jebek, and Borchu. He was really surprised. "What are they doing here?" he thought. He wanted to go nearer, but the pursuers had already surrounded the three riders. The three Mongolians were experts at shooting arrows, so the pursuers did not dare to come too close and shot their own arrows from a distance.

"Let's go up!" one of the Mongolians shouted, his hand pointing to a flagpole. The three scurried to the flagpole and climbed up. They were trying to gain a better position.

The pursuers dismounted and surrounded the flagpole on all sides. Somebody shouted an order and four soldiers lifted high their shields, came near the flagpole and tried to chop it down with their swords.

"You are wrong," Huang Rong whispered, "There are only fifteen pursuers."

"No, I can't be wrong," Guo Jing countered. "Maybe one of them was killed." He'd just closed his mouth when a horse came wandering in. There was a rider with it but he was dead with an arrow sticking out from his chest; his foot was stuck in the stirrup so the horse was dragging him along.

Guo Jing crawled towards the corpse and pulled the arrow out. As soon as he felt the arrow with his fingers he could feel that it was made of wrought iron and had the engraving of a leopard's head. It was an arrow used by the Master Archer Jebek and was heavier than average arrows. His suspicion was gone; he called out, "You on the flagpole, are you Master Jebek, Brother Tolui and Master Borchu? This is Guo Jing!"

The three were delighted. "How can you be here?" they asked.

"Who pursues you?" Guo Jing asked.

"Jin soldiers!" Tolui answered.

Guo Jing grabbed the dead Jin soldier's body, lifted it up, and rushed forward. He threw the corpse toward the soldiers at the foot of the flagpole. The corpse did knock down two soldiers and the other two were frightened and ran away.

Out of the blue two white shadows swooped down to Guo Jing. He recognized his two eagles, which he and Hua Zheng raised back in Mongolia. The two birds recognized their master even in the dark night; they uttered a loud cry and came down on Guo Jing's shoulders.

Huang Rong had heard Guo Jing's story of how he had shot two eagles and how he raised a pair of eagles as his playmates. Now, suddenly seeing the white eagles, she ignored the surrounding soldiers. She came running towards Guo Jing and called out, "Let me play with them!" She held out her hand to stroke one eagle's feathers. But the eagle did not know Huang Rong, so it moved its head to hit Huang Rong's hand with its beak. Luckily Huang Rong was quick; if not, the back of her hand would've been injured.

Guo Jing hurriedly pulled the birds away. Huang Rong sulked, "Your pet birds are bad!" But actually she was happy, she bent her head to take a closer look at them.

"Rong'er, watch out!" Guo Jing shouted suddenly. Two fast arrows flew toward Huang Rong's chest. She ignored the arrows and nonchalantly reached towards the dead soldier's pocket. The arrows were right on target, but they hit the soft hedgehog armor and simply fell down near her foot. Huang Rong continued groping in the pocket until she found some dried meat and fed it to the birds.

"Rong'er, play with the eagles, I am going to kill some Jin soldiers!" Guo Jing said. He jumped to strike an arrow flying towards him, stretched his left palm and with a cracking sound broke a nearby Jin soldier's arm.

"Where did the dog that creates trouble come from?" a voice called out suddenly in the dark. Surprisingly, he was speaking Chinese. Guo Jing was startled, "That voice sounds familiar," he thought. At that time a couple of metal weapons came flashing his way as two short hatchets came chopping down at him, one slashing at his chest, the other slashing towards his lower abdomen.

Guo Jing saw the incoming force was fierce and he knew the attacker was not an ordinary officer. He immediately shot out his palm using the 'Divine Dragon Swings its Tail'. His palm hit the man on the shoulder shattering the shoulder blade into pieces and sent the man flying backwards a few feet. The man cried out pitifully. Suddenly Guo Jing remembered, "This is one of the 'Four Demons of the Yellow River' [Huang He si gui], the 'Axe Buries Family' [sang men fu] Qian Qingjian."

Guo Jing knew that his martial arts skill had improved tremendously these past several months and of course he was in an entirely different league compared to when he fought the Four Demons of the Yellow River in Mongolia a while back. But to be able to knock the enemy back more than ten feet with only one palm? He was amazed. While he was still thinking about it, more metal objects came flashing toward him. This time it was a saber and a spear.

Guo Jing guessed they must be 'Saber Breaks Down the Soul' [duan hu dao] Shen Qinggang and 'Lance Seizes Life' [zhui ming qiang] Wu Qinglie. With his right hand forming a hook he caught the spear near its head and pulled it hard. Wu Qinglie tried to resist, but he was pulled along and fell face down in front of Guo Jing. Right at that moment as Guo Jing was stepping back to elude the chopping saber, Shen Qinggang's blade was hacking toward his martial brother's skull. Guo Jing's leg flew up and kicked Shen Qinggang's right wrist. A streak of blue light flashed in the dark night as his saber flew from his hand; Wu Qinglie's life was saved. Guo Jing then picked up Wu Qinglie and whirled him at his martial brother. With a 'bang', two brothers collided and both passed out immediately.

Of the Four Demons of the Yellow River, only three were left, since 'Whip Capture Spirit' [duo po bian] Ma Qingxiong was killed by Lu Guanying when he was trying to infiltrate

the pirate gang of Lake Tai. These three people were the elite fighters of the Jin soldiers who pursued Tolui and his companions. The rest of the Jin soldiers were not aware that their leaders had fallen due to the darkness. They were still engaging Tolui, Jebek and Borjigin in a shooting battle.

"You are not running away, do all of you want to die here?" Guo Jing roared. He rushed towards the enemy soldiers, hitting here and grabbing there, throwing bodies everywhere. Very soon the soldiers panicked and scattered in all directions. Shen Qinggang and Wu Qinglie slowly came to their senses, each with a splitting headache. Their vision was still fuzzy, but they realized that their company had scattered so they also ran away without hesitation. They accidentally stumbled upon Qian Qingjian and woke him up. He mumbled indistinctly, but seeing the rest of the soldiers had run away, he ignored his pain and they ran in different directions.

Jebek and Borjigin were skilled archers; they kept shooting arrows and managed to kill three more Jin soldiers. Tolui looked down and saw that his sworn brother had scattered the enemy. He was delighted and called out, "Anda [Mongolian term for sworn brother]! How are you?" He slid down the flagpole to the ground.

Guo Jing and Tolui held each other's hands; they were so happy that they were speechless for a while. A moment later Jebek and Borjigin joined them. "Those three Han holding shields blocked our arrows, preventing us from shooting them," Jebek said. "If Jing'er had not come to rescue us, we wouldn't be able to drink the Onon River's clear water anymore."

Guo Jing pulled Huang Rong's hand to let her meet Tolui and company. "This is my sworn sister," he introduced her.

“Will you give me these two white eagles?” Huang Rong asked, smiling. Tolui did not understand Chinese and his translator had run away when they were being attacked by the Jin soldiers. He’d noticed that Huang Rong’s voice was clear and sounded pleasant to his ears, but he actually had no idea what she was saying.

Guo Jing ignored Huang Rong’s request. “Anda, why did you bring the eagles here?” he asked.

“Father sent me to see the Song Emperor; we want to make an agreement between the north and south, so that we can dispatch troops together and attack the Jin from both directions,” Tolui explained. “My sister thought I might meet you here, so she sent these eagles to you. She guessed right, I did meet you here.”

When Guo Jing heard him mentioning Hua Zheng, he was speechless. He knew he was in love with Huang Rong; when he sometimes thought of Hua Zheng he felt it wasn’t right. However, he did not know how to resolve the matter, and tried not to think too much about it. But now, hearing what Tolui said, he was at a loss. His only thought was, “Within a month I am going to Peach Blossom Island where Rong’er’s father might kill me. There’s no point thinking about it now.” Therefore, he turned toward Huang Rong and told her, “These two birds are mine. You can have them to play with.”

Huang Rong was delighted; she found more dried meat to feed the eagles.

Tolui proceeded by telling how his father, Genghis Khan, had gained victory over the Jin on several fronts; but the Jin army was strong in numbers. They’d consolidated themselves and for many years strengthened their forts so that, for a while, they’ve managed to defend their borders.

Therefore Genghis Khan had sent Tolui to make contact with the south to form an alliance with the Song to attack the Jin. Unfortunately they ran into a brigade of the Jin army and could not avoid a battle. Their company perished and only the three of them managed to escape and run here.

Guo Jing remembered that day at Cloud Manor he heard Yang Kang asking Mu Nianci to go to Lin'an and see the Prime Minister Shi Miyuan, to ask him to kill the Mongolian messengers. At that time he did not know anything specific, but now he knew that the Jin had discovered the conspiracy and had sent Yang Kang to prevent the Song and Mongols from forming an alliance.

Tolui continued, "Looks like the Jin have determined to kill me to avoid Mongolia and the Song Dynasty from successfully forming an alliance; the Sixth Prince himself personally led the troops to capture me."

"Wanyan Honglie?" Guo Jing asked in surprise.

"That's right!" Tolui answered. "He was wearing a golden helmet; I saw him clearly and even shot three arrows at him. Too bad they were blocked by his bodyguards' shields."

Guo Jing was ecstatic, "Rong'er, Brother Kang! Wanyan Honglie is here. Let us quickly find him." Huang Rong quickly agreed, but Yang Kang was nowhere to be seen. Guo Jing was impatient, he shouted, "Rong'er, you go to the east, I will search to the west." The two people used their lightness kungfu and ran very fast in opposite directions.

After several li Guo Jing managed to catch up with several runaway Jin soldiers. He captured one of them and found out that it was indeed the Sixth Prince Wanyan Honglie who personally led the pursuers; but the soldier did not know his whereabouts.

"We have deserted the Prince without any regard for his safety; if we go back, we will be executed. Therefore we are throwing away our uniforms and trying to hide among the common people," the soldier said.

Guo Jing turned and resumed his chase. It was almost dawn, but where was Wanyan Honglie? He knew the enemy who killed his father was near but seemed to be unreachable. He was anxious.

He rushed forward a little bit further and arrived at a small wooded area where he saw a white shadow flashing by. It was Huang Rong. The two met, looked at each other and knew they had not found him. Dejectedly they decided to go back to the temple.

"Wanyan Honglie led quite a number of troops pursuing us; he was riding a fast horse. I think by now he must be going back to fetch reinforcements to capture us," Tolui reasoned. "Anda, I am bearing my father's decree; I can't stay for long. Let us part here. My little sister asked me to deliver this message to you: Please come back home to Mongolia as soon as possible."

Guo Jing agreed to what he said, but feared that it would be difficult for them to meet again in the future. His heart was heavy. He hugged Tolui, Jebek and Borchu and bade them farewell, saying very little. They mounted their horses and galloped away. The sound of hoof beats gradually vanished; men and horses hidden behind a cloud of yellow dust.

"Let us hide and wait for Wanyan Honglie to come back," Huang Rong proposed. "If the troops are numerous, we will simply follow them and try to assassinate him in the evening. Don't you think it's a good idea?"

Guo Jing was delighted. He praised Huang Rong endlessly. Huang Rong was very happy too, she smiled and said, "It



was nothing, I was just using the common tactic of 'leaving the shore to move to a ship' [yi an jiu chuan]."

"I'll go to the woods to hide our horses," Guo Jing said. He walked towards the backyard of the temple and suddenly saw something gleaming in the grass in the morning sun. He bent down to take a closer look and found that thing was a golden helmet, inlaid with three big jewels. Guo Jing picked it up and walked back to Huang Rong. "What do you think this is?" he quietly asked.

"Wanyan Honglie's golden helmet?" Huang Rong guessed.

"Exactly!" whispered Guo Jing. "I believe he is still hiding somewhere close to this temple. Let's spread out and find him."

Huang Rong turned, her hands pressed down on the wall and she floated atop the wall in no time. "I'll search from above, you from below," she called out. Guo Jing entered the temple.

"Was my lightness kungfu good?" Huang Rong called.

Guo Jing was taken aback, he stopped in his tracks. "It was very good! Why?" he asked.

"Then why didn't you praise me?" Huang Rong said with a laugh.

Guo Jing stomped his feet. "You're a mischievous kid! You still want to joke at a time like this," he said.

Huang Rong simply laughed; raising her hands, she flew to the rear courtyard.

When Guo Jing was fighting the Jin soldiers, Yang Kang had observed from one side. Despite the darkness he could recognize the Sixth Prince Wanyan Honglie. Although Yang

Kang knew by now he was not his father, he nonetheless had raised Yang Kang for more than eighteen years. He had been a father figure to Yang Kang all this time. Yang Kang saw how Guo Jing dispersed the Jin soldiers; if Wanyan Honglie was seen by Guo Jing, he would surely lose his life. It was a critical moment and Yang Kang did not have too much time to think; so he jumped onto the battleground. At that time Guo Jing was hurling a Jin soldier's body into the air. Wanyan Honglie's horse got frightened, so he was busy holding the reins. Yang Kang grabbed him from behind and pulled him to safety.

"Fu Wang [Father King], it's me, Kang'er. Don't make a sound!" Yang Kang whispered urgently. Guo Jing was still fighting and Huang Rong's attention was occupied by the eagles. The night was dark, so nobody saw him with Wanyan Honglie moving towards the rear courtyard of the temple.

Yang Kang quietly pushed open the door to the west wing and, equally quietly, the two hid themselves there. Their ears could still hear the battle cries outside, followed by the sounds of Jin soldiers scampering away; finally they heard the mumbled sounds of the three Mongolians talking to Guo Jing.

Wanyan Honglie thought he was dreaming, "Kang'er," he whispered, "What brought you here?"

"It was a fortunate coincidence," Yang Kang replied. "Ah ... but that man surnamed Guo means you harm."

By then Wanyan Honglie heard Guo Jing and Huang Rong were going to go separate ways to look for him. He also saw how Guo Jing had defeated the 'Three Ghosts of the Yellow River' and how fiercely and swiftly he had beaten and killed

numerous Jin soldiers. If he were discovered by those two, what would happen? He shuddered involuntarily.

"Fu Wang, if we go now, I am afraid we'll run into them. Let's just hide here; they will leave eventually. We'll wait until they are far away, then we can carefully leave," Yang Kang said.

"That's not a bad idea," Wanyan Honglie said. He paused, then said, "Kang'er, why did you call me Fu Wang and not dad [die]?"

Yang Kang was silent. He remembered his late mother's fate and his heart was filled with turbulent emotions.

Wanyan Honglie said slowly, "You were thinking of your mother, were you not?" He stretched his arm to hold Yang Kang's hand and that hand was icy cold with Yang Kang's sweat.

Yang Kang gently pulled his hand away. He changed the subject, "Guo Jing's martial arts are high. He is seeking vengeance for his father; he is determined to find and kill you. He also has befriended many, many experts in martial arts; it will be impossible for you to guard against him. I think it will be to your benefit if you do not go back to Beijing for the next six months or so."

Wanyan Honglie recalled what happened at Ox Village near Lin'an nineteen years ago; he was saddened. Yet there was a tinge of guilty feelings in him, so he was silent for quite a while. "Very well," he finally said, "I'll avoid Beijing for a while. Have you gone to Lin'an yet? What did Prime Minister Shi say?"

"I haven't been there," Yang Kang coldly replied.

Wanyan Honglie heard the tone of his voice and guessed that Yang Kang had probably found out about his own life story; but why did Yang Kang save him? Could he have another plan in mind?

Those two men had lived together for eighteen years as father and son; they loved each other dearly. But now that they were together in that small room, Yang Kang suddenly thought there was a deep hatred between them. There was a raging battle inside his heart: "With just a whack of my palm I will avenge my father and mother; but how can I do that? Yang Tiexin was my biological father, but what did he give me? Mama normally treated Fu Wang well and if I kill him now, would Mama like it? Besides, if I really forsake being a prince, will I end up wandering around in the wilderness, destitute like Guo Jing?"

He was still having these disquieting thoughts when Wanyan Honglie said, "Kang'er, we have had a father-son relationship. No matter what, you are my son and I love you. Within ten years our great Jin will conquer the Song. At that time I will have enormous power and authority in my hands, with unlimited riches and honor. This beautiful country, this mortal world, will eventually fall into your hands."

Yang Kang understood the implications of his speech; Wanyan Honglie aimed to be the emperor. Thinking about 'unlimited riches and honor', his heart was thumping loudly and he secretly thought, "With the power of the Great Jin, it will not be difficult to crush the Song. Mongolia will pose another problem, but it will be temporary. They are just a bunch of barbarians with excellent riding and archery skills; nothing refined. Fu Wang's management skill is superb. Which other Great Jin prince can be compared to him? When all's said and done, I will definitely become the crown prince of this world." Thinking thus, his blood boiled.

He stretched his hand to grab Wanyan Honglie's. "Dad, your child will certainly help you in this great undertaking."

Wanyan Honglie noticed Yang Kang's hand had become warm; he was delighted. "I am Li Yuan, you are Li Shi Min." [Translator note: Li Yuan and Li Shi Min were the father and son founders of the Tang Dynasty]

Yang Kang was about to reply when they suddenly heard a noise behind them. The two men froze. Quickly they turned their heads. It was already morning and bright sunlight came through the window. They saw seven or eight coffins scattered throughout the room. It turns out that this west wing was the temporary place for the dead before burial. They listened carefully; the noise sounded like it came from one of the coffins.

"What was that?" Wanyan Honglie asked.

"Probably a mouse," Yang Kang replied. At that moment they heard Guo Jing and Huang Rong talking outside about the golden helmet; then joking around as they looked for them.

"Confound it!" Yang Kang thought, "Father's golden helmet was left outside! This could be bad." With a low voice he said, "I am going to lead them away." Quietly he opened the door and jumped outside, towards the roof.

Huang Rong was on the roof when she suddenly saw a shadow flash by on the roof's peak. "Good! He is here!" She dashed toward that shadow, but the shadow quickly jumped down and disappeared around a corner.

Guo Jing heard her voice and came. "He can't run far and must be hiding in the woods," Huang Rong said.

The two were about to run into the woods when suddenly there was a noise from the bush and out came Yang Kang. Guo Jing was pleasantly surprised. "Xian di, where did you come from?" he asked. "Did you see Wanyan Honglie?"

"Wanyan Honglie is here?" Yang Kang feigned surprise.

"He was the commander of those troops. Look, his golden helmet is here," Guo Jing said.

"So that's how it is," Yang Kang said.

Huang Rong noticed his expression was unusual; she also remembered he was speaking with Ouyang Ke earlier so she was suspicious. "We were looking for you everywhere just a moment ago. Where were you?" she asked.

"I ate too many strange foods yesterday, I think I suffered food poisoning, so I relieved myself over there," Yang Kang said, pointing to a small wooded area.

Huang Rong did not believe him, but she was too uncomfortable to challenge him. "Xian di," Guo Jing said, "Let's look together."

Yang Kang was worried; he was not sure if Wanyan Honglie had run away or was still here; but his face did not show anything. "He came here to die! We could not have asked for anything better," he said, "Why don't you two search to the east, I'll go to the west."

"Very well." Guo Jing said, immediately walking to the east and pushing open the door to the 'Clemency and Filial Hall' [jie xiao tang].

"Brother Yang," Huang Rong said, "I think that man is hiding in the west wing; let me come with you."

Yang Kang groaned inwardly, but his face feigned happiness. "Let us go, quickly!" he said, "Don't let him run away." Immediately the two searched from room to room.

The Liu family of Baoying was originally an important family during the Song Dynasty; naturally their ancestral temple was huge. Because of the war with the Jin, this temple was partially burned and some of the Liu family killed. Therefore parts of temple were left in ruins without any effort to rebuild it.

With a cold look Huang Rong watched Yang Kang open dust-laden and spider-webbed doors one by one. He searched each and every room. Finally they arrived at the west wing. Huang Rong saw thick dust on the floor and in that dust there were several footprints, which – from the look of them, were recently made. There were a couple of handprints on the closed door too. "In here!" she shouted excitedly.

Guo Jing and Yang Kang both heard her shout; Guo Jing was delighted, while Yang Kang was anxious; both rushed towards her.

Huang Rong kicked the door open, but to her surprise, all she saw were several coffins with no sign of Wanyan Honglie.

Yang Kang was greatly relieved, he knew Wanyan Honglie must have escaped; but he entered the room and loudly shouted, "Wanyan Honglie, traitor! Where do you hide? Come out!"

"Brother Yang, he must have heard us a long time ago. You don't have to be so kind as to let him know we are here," Huang Rong snickered.

Yang Kang was embarrassed, his face flushed, "Miss Huang, why do you joke with me?" His embarrassment turned to anger.

"Never mind her, Xian di; Rong'er likes to joke," Guo Jing smiled. He lowered his head and said, "Look here, someone must have left all these footprints. Indeed he was here."

"Quick, we must pursue him!" Huang Rong urged. Just as she turned her head, there came a noise from behind her. All three were frightened. They saw a coffin move slightly.

Huang Rong had always been afraid of coffins and ever since she entered this room, she had been feeling queasy; now a coffin suddenly moved by itself, she uttered a cry and tightly held Guo Jing's arm. But even though her heart was scared, her brain was still working. "That traitor ... that traitor hides in the coffin," she said with a trembling voice.

Yang Kang suddenly pointed his finger outside, "Hey! He is over there!" Without waiting for a reply he readied to run outside. But Huang Rong was quick, she reached backward and grabbed Yang Kang's main artery. "You have seen a ghost?" she sneered.

Half of Yang Kang's body was numb; he could not move. "You ... what are you doing?" he asked anxiously.

Guo Jing was delighted. "Right...that traitor must be hiding in the coffin." With big strides he walked towards the coffin and lifted his hands, ready should Wanyan Honglie came out.

"Elder Brother, be careful!" Yang Kang called out. "There could be a zombie inside."

Huang Rong twisted Yang Kang's hand so that he fell to the floor. "You still want to scare me?" she asked angrily. She



was certain that it was Wanyan Honglie hiding inside the coffin, but still, she was scared. What if it really was a zombie inside? You never know, do you?

“Jing ge ge, not so fast!” she tremblingly said.

Guo Jing halted and turned his head, “What is it?”

“Just hold the lid down,” Huang Rong said. “Don’t let ... don’t let that thing come out.”

Guo Jing smiled, “How can it be a zombie?” But he saw that Huang Rong was really afraid, so he jumped toward the coffin and comforted her, “He won’t be able to crawl out!”

Huang Rong was still anxious, she hesitated a little bit, and then said, “Jing ge ge, let me hit the coffin using the ‘Empty Splitting Palm’ [pi kong zhang] while you keep your eyes open. Whether it is a zombie or Wanyan Honglie, I will split the coffin. Then we’ll see whether it is a person crying or a zombie wailing!”

As soon as she finished speaking she exerted energy to her palms, took two steps and sent the palms at the coffin. Her ‘Empty Splitting Palm’ was not as strong as Lu Chengfeng’s; therefore, she needed to hit the coffin directly. Actually it could be launched from a distance with empty air between her and the target.

“That’s not right!” Yang Kang said anxiously, “You hit the coffin’s lid and a zombie might poke his head out and bite your hand, that won’t be good!”

He was successful in making Huang Rong more frightened than ever. She was shivering and halted her movement. Suddenly a cry came out from the coffin; it was a woman’s voice. Huang Rong jumped. She was extremely terrified. “A

female ghost!" she cried. Flailing her hands she ran outside and cried, "Quick! Get out of here!"

Guo Jing was brave, "Brother Yang, let us lift the coffin lid and take a look," he said.

Yang Kang was drenched in a cold sweat, but how could he refuse Guo Jing's request? Surely he could not make himself an enemy of this Guo-Huang couple. But then he heard that woman's voice again, so he rushed ahead to raise the coffin lid. They used a knife to jack the lid up and together they opened the lid, which actually had not been nailed to the coffin.

Guo Jing had directed his strength to his arms, ready to strike the zombie's head; but when he looked down, he was stunned. There was no zombie; it was a good-looking young girl, with a pair of big eyes looking up at them. It was none other than Mu Nianci.

Yang Kang was pleasantly surprised and quickly he held out his hand to help her out.

"Rong'er, come here, quick!" Guo Jing called out. "Look who's here?"

Huang Rong turned her head with her eyes closed. "I don't want to see!" she shouted back.

"But it's Elder Sister Mu!" Guo Jing urged.

With her left eye still closed, Huang Rong took a peek with her right eye. She saw Yang Kang embracing a woman who looked like Mu Nianci. She felt relieved and timidly entered the room again. Who was that woman if not Mu Nianci?

Huang Rong saw Mu Nianci's face looked haggard and two streams of tears flowed down her cheeks. She was unable

to move. Huang Rong unsealed her acupoint and asked, "Elder Sister, why are you here?"

Mu Nianci's acupoint had been sealed for quite a while; her whole body was stiff and her breathing was uneven. Huang Rong helped by rubbing her back. After a while [about the time needed to drink a cup of tea] Mu Nianci told her, "I was captured and held prisoner."

Huang Rong noticed that the sealed acupoint was located at the center of the sole of the foot; the 'Bursting Fountain' [yong quan] acupoint. This was rarely used by the wulin characters of the Central Plains. So with eighty to ninety percent certainty she guessed, "Was it that bastard Ouyang Ke?" Mu Nianci did not answer, but she nodded.

That day when she was trying to contact Mei Chaofeng for Yang Kang's sake she was captured by Ouyang Ke near the pile of skulls and her acupoint was sealed. After Huang Yaoshi played his jade flute to disperse the snakes and help Mei Chaofeng; Ouyang Ke's concubines and his three snake herders were left unconscious by the flute's sound and Ouyang Ke ran away in distress. At daybreak the concubines and the snake herders woke up and found Mu Nianci lying on her side, unable to move. They took her to their master. Ouyang Ke tried to rape her, but she was determined to fight to her death. Although Ouyang Ke was conceited and lecherous, he always prided himself as being an elegant and cultured man; his martial arts skill was high, so he could easily melt women's hearts. If he resorted to violence and brute force, he would certainly succeed in raping her; but then he would mar the name of the White Camel Mountain. Because of this pride, Mu Nianci was fortunate and able to keep her purity.

Afterwards they arrived at Baoying and Ouyang Ke hid her inside one of the Liu ancestral temple's coffins. He then

sent his concubines to 'invite' several beautiful young women from rich families, including Miss Cheng. It was then that the Beggar Clan intervened which resulted in a battle. Ouyang Ke left in a hurry. He'd had several women these past few days, so he did not remember Mu Nianci was still inside one of the coffins. If Guo Jing and the others had not been looking for Wanyan Honglie, she would have starved to death inside the coffin.

Yang Kang was unexpectedly happy to see his beloved here. With a compassionate face he said, "Little sister, just rest here, I am going to boil some water for you to drink."

"How can you boil some water?" Huang Rong smiled, "I'll go. Jing ge ge, come with me." She had thought to leave those two alone to alleviate their lovesickness, but Mu Nianci sat straight up, "Hold a moment!" she said without a smile, "Mister Yang, I congratulate you on your unlimited riches and honor in the future."

Yang Kang felt a flush creeping onto his whole face, but his heart turned cold. "She must have heard my conversation with Fu Wang in here." He stood still not knowing what to do.

Mu Nianci saw he was distressed and her heart melted; she did not have the heart to reveal the secret that he was the one who let Wanyan Honglie go, for fear that Guo Jing and Huang Rong would kill him out of anger.

"You called him 'Dad', wasn't that better? It is much more intimate than if you call him 'Fu Wang', isn't it?" she coldly said. Yang Kang felt so ashamed; he hung his head and did not say anything.

Huang Rong did not know what was going on; she thought this young woman was upset and blamed Yang Kang for not coming earlier to rescue her. She pulled Guo Jing's sleeve

and whispered, "Let's go out, I am sure those two will make up immediately." Guo Jing smiled and went along with her.

"Let's eavesdrop on what they're saying," Huang Rong said as soon as they reached the courtyard.

Guo Jing smiled, "Don't intentionally create trouble. I don't want to listen."

"Very well!" Huang Rong sulked. "Just don't be disappointed if I hear something interesting and I don't tell you about it." She leaped to the roof and walked quietly back to the west wing only to hear Mu Nianci speaking harshly.

"You called an enemy your father. I can understand that considering your past relationship; you will get over it. But who would have thought you also have delusional thoughts; you want to destroy the country of your own parents, this ... this ..." Reaching this point she was so furious that she could not continue.

Yang Kang smiled nervously. "Little sister, I ..." he said softly, but Mu Nianci cut him short. "Who's your little sister? Don't touch me!" she screamed. 'Slap!' her hand left a red imprint on Yang Kang's face.

Huang Rong was surprised. "They're fighting, I must stop them," she thought. Entering through a window she laughed and said, "Aiyo! Even if you don't agree with each other, please don't resort to violence." But she stopped dead in her track at seeing Mu Nianci's fiery red cheeks while Yang Kang was very pale. She was about to open her mouth again when Yang Kang suddenly shouted, "Good! You have met the new one and abandoned the old. Your heart is already occupied by another and so you treat me like this."

"You ... what did you say?" Mu Nianci stammered. Yang Kang snickered, "You and that fellow named Ouyang. His martial arts are ten times better than mine; of course you would immediately brush me from your heart."

Mu Nianci was so angry that her hands and feet went icy-cold; she nearly passed out.

Huang Rong interrupted, "Brother Yang, you must not speak nonsense; if Sister Mu liked him, why would that bastard seal her acupoint and leave her starving inside the coffin?"

Out of shame Yang Kang became indignant. "The truth is good, yet hypocrisy is also good. She was held by that bastard for quite some time and she has lost her innocence. How could she and I be together again?"

Mu Nianci was outraged, "I ... I ... What innocence have I lost?"

"You were in that man's possession for many days; he must have cuddled you, you must have embraced him. How could you keep your crystal clear purity?" Yang Kang mocked.

Mu Nianci really could not hold herself back any longer. She was tired and angry. This last attack was too vicious for her to bear. With a 'wah' sound she spit some blood and fell backwards.

Yang Kang realized his words were too vicious; seeing her like that he felt remorse and wanted to embrace and comfort her. Then he remembered she knew his secret. Huang Rong had voiced her suspicions earlier; if Mu Nianci should open her mouth, his life would be in danger. Moreover, he was worried about his father; so without saying anything he turned around, rushed outside and leaped over the wall.

Huang Rong had to massage Mu Nianci's chest for quite a while before she finally came to. She was unusually composed and did not even cry. "Little Sister," she calmly said, "Let me borrow the dagger I gave you earlier."

"Jing ge ge!" Huang Rong called out loudly, "Can you come here, please?" Guo Jing quickly came. "Please give the dagger that belongs to Brother Yang to Elder Sister Mu," Huang Rong said.

"Certainly," Guo Jing complied. He pulled the dagger out of his pocket; it was the dagger taken by Zhu Cong from Mei Chaofeng. It was wrapped in, what would appear to the casual observer, a thin sheet of leather. The leather was full of characters tattooed with a needle. Guo Jing was not aware that the characters were actually the second part of the 'Nine Yin Manual'. He casually unrolled the leather sheet and gave the dagger to Mu Nianci.

Huang Rong also took a dagger out from her pocket; she softly said, "Jing ge ge's dagger is in my possession; Brother Yang's dagger is now in yours. Elder Sister, this is a destiny that will bring you two together. You have had a disagreement, but for the moment, please don't be sad. My father and I are also having some disagreements. Jing ge ge and I are going to Beijing to look for Wanyan Honglie. Elder Sister, please don't let your heart be troubled. Why don't you come with us? We can walk leisurely together. I am sure Brother Yang will come back to you."

Guo Jing was puzzled, "Brother Yang?" Huang Rong stuck out her tongue. "He provoked Elder Sister; Elder Sister slapped him hard. Elder Sister Mu, if Brother Yang did not like you, how come he did not retaliate when you slapped him? His martial arts are stronger than yours. The fight between you ..." She wanted to say 'the fight between you two must be a habit' (she was referring to the 'Joust to Find

a Spouse), but she saw Mu Nianci was grieving and she did not have the heart to make a joke.

"I am not going to Beijing," Mu Nianci said, "You also don't have to go. For the next half a year that traitor Wanyan Honglie won't be in Beijing. He is afraid of you. Brother Guo, Little Sister, you are good people, your life must also be good ..." She choked up; covered her face and rushed towards the door. With a leap she was gone.

Huang Rong looked down and saw the blood Mu Nianci spit up earlier. She hesitated for a moment, and in the end did not feel comfortable doing nothing, so she also leaped over the wall and chased after her, only to see Mu Nianci under a big willow tree in the distance. The sunlight reflected on the dagger's naked blade. Mu Nianci lifted the dagger high above her head. Huang Rong was anxious; she thought Mu Nianci was going to kill herself. She shouted loudly, "Elder Sister! Please don't ..." But the distance between them was too great; she would not be able to stop her. Luckily Mu Nianci only raised her left hand holding up her hair. With a slash of the dagger in her right hand she sheared off a big clump of hair, threw it to the ground and ran away.

"Elder Sister! Elder Sister ... !" Huang Rong called out. Mu Nianci turned a deaf ear and kept going.

Huang Rong stared blankly in the distance, she was lost in thought. She saw the clump of soft hair dancing in the morning breeze. A short time later some of the hair was scattered to a rice field, some went into a creek, some flew up into the trees lining the pathway and some followed the blowing dust, going who knows where. Huang Rong had always been tender, carefree and mischievous since her childhood. She laughed when happy, cried or sulked when not; the word 'anxiety' was never in her vocabulary. But now that she saw what had just happened, she could not



keep sadness from creeping into her heart. Now, she found out about the world of anxiety.

She slowly walked back to the temple and told Guo Jing what had happened to Mu Nianci. Guo Jing did not know why those two people were having a disagreement; he simply said, "I don't understand why Elder Sister Mu made such a big deal out of it. I think her character is just too rigid."

"How could a woman hugged by a stranger lose her innocence? Even her loved one did not respect her anymore or care about her any longer." Huang Rong thought. She did not have a clue as to the reasoning behind all it, so she brushed it off as 'that was the way it was' and left it at that. She slowly walked to the rear courtyard and sat against a pillar. Her mind was heavy with thoughts. She closed her eyes and fell asleep.

That very evening Li Sheng and other Beggar Clan members threw a banquet in honor of their leader, Hong Qigong, and also to congratulate Guo Jing and Huang Rong. They waited until around midnight but Hong Qigong still had not shown up. Li Sheng knew his Leader's unusual habits so he did not give it any thought; he kept serving wine to Guo Jing and Huang Rong and they drank to their hearts' content. The people of the Beggar Clan had high respect for these two people, so their conversations were congenial. Miss Cheng had personally prepared some food, provided four big pots of good quality wine, and delivered everything via her servants.

After the banquet was over Guo Jing and Huang Rong discussed what to do next. Wanyan Honglie would not be in Beijing, so it would be difficult to find him in a short period of time. The Peach Blossom Island appointment was drawing near. Guo Jing needed to go back to Jiaying

immediately and consult with his six masters on what action they would take.

Huang Rong nodded her head in agreement. "I think it is best for your six masters not to go to Peach Blossom Island," she added. "You fought with father and received quite a beating; for him to hit a few more heads is no big deal, is it? If you don't agree with me, let me hit you a few more times on the head. If your six masters meet my father again, what good will it bring?"

"You're right," Guo Jing said. "But you don't need to hit my head."

Early the next morning the two rode south. It was the beginning of the sixth month and the weather was burning hot. Natives of Jiangnan had a saying, 'the sixth day of the sixth month, a duck egg was cooked by the sun.' Traveling under the hot sun they were very miserable. So they would hurry along early in the mornings and later in the evenings and rested at noon.

A few days later they arrived at Jiaxing. Since it was earlier than the appointed time, the Six Freaks were not there yet. Guo Jing wrote a letter and left it with the innkeeper of the Pavilion of the Drunken Immortal, asking him to deliver the letter in person to the Six Freaks of Jiangnan when they arrived at the beginning of the seventh month.

In the letter he explained that he had met Huang Rong and was going to Peach Blossom Island to fulfill his promise and that with Huang Yaoshi's beloved daughter's company, he should not come across any problems. He asked his six masters to not be anxious and that they need not accompany him, and so on.

Even though he said that, he was actually afraid since Huang Yaoshi was very peculiar. He thought he would more

likely meet misfortune than good fortune. He was afraid Huang Rong would feel anxious for him, so he did not tell her anything. Knowing that his six masters did not have to go into harm's way was his only consolation.

The couple headed east. After Zhoushan, they hired a boat and continued by sea. Huang Rong knew that local sailors were afraid of Peach Blossom Island, like some people are afraid of vipers or scorpions. Nobody dared to sail within forty li of the island. If she mentioned the name of Peach Blossom Island, no matter how much money she offered, nobody would be willing to take them. So she said they were going shrimp fishing at a nearby island. It was only after they were quite a distance from shore did she tell the boatman to change course to the north. The boatman was terrified, but Huang Rong wielded a dagger in front of his chest; a cold and bright sparkle emanated from the blade so he had no choice but to comply with their request.

As the boat was nearing the island, Guo Jing smelled a flowery fragrance amidst the salty smell of the sea. He turned his gaze towards the island. It was green and lush with colorful trees and shrubs. Some were green, some red, some yellow, and some purple. The island looked like a massive flower garden.

Huang Rong smiled. "Isn't it beautiful?" she asked.

Guo Jing sighed, "I have never seen so many beautiful flowers in my whole life," he answered.

Huang Rong was very pleased; she smiled and explained, "Come the third month, the peach blossoms are in full bloom. That is really beautiful. Shifu did not want to admit that my father's martial arts are number one in the world, but he cannot deny the fact that my father's gardening skill is unrivaled. Too bad he is only interested in food and drink;

he doesn't even know what a good flower or plant is. He's such an uncouth person."

"You are talking about Shifu behind his back," Guo Jing scolded, "Not a good habit." Huang Rong stuck her tongue out and made a face.

They waited until the boat was closer before they leaped ashore. Guo Jing's red horse also jumped to the shore. The boatman had heard many horror stories about the island; it was said that the Master of Peach Blossom Island would kill without batting an eye, that he liked to dig out people's hearts, lungs, livers and intestines. As soon as his passengers disembarked, he turned the rudder, wanting to leave the island as soon as possible.

Huang Rong took out a silver ingot of ten 'liang' [ounces] and tossed it to the boat. With a clanking noise it landed on the bow. The boatman did not expect such a generous recompense; he looked ashore delighted, but still did not dare to stay near that island much longer.

Being home again, Huang Rong's was ecstatic. "Father! Father! Rong'er is back!" she shouted loudly. Beckoning Guo Jing to come, she then dashed forward.

Guo Jing saw her turning east and dodging west amongst the flowers and very soon disappeared from his sight. He hastily chased her, but after several 'zhang' he had already lost track of her. He saw there were trails heading east, south, west and north; but did not know which one he should take.

When he arbitrarily took a path and walked for while and he seemed to be returning to where he'd started. He recalled the pathways of Cloud Manor Manor; Huang Rong had said that although that manor's layout was wonderfully arranged it still paled in comparison with Peach Blossom

Island, whose design was based on yin-yang and open-closed elements. If he forced himself to walk in this wonderful, almost magical place he would end up wasting his strength in vain. So he decided to just sit underneath a peach tree and wait for Huang Rong to fetch him. Who would have thought that after waiting for half a day Huang Rong still had not come. He looked around in all directions but did not see even the shadow of a human being; not even a single sound was heard. He was lost!

Anxiously he stood up and climbed atop a nearby tree. Again he looked everywhere; to the south of him was the sea, to the west was a barren rock hill, to the north and east were forests of flowers of all kinds and colors; he could not even see the end of it. His head became dizzy. He did not see anything that resembled a wall or a chimney; he did not even hear a dog's bark. It was so extremely quiet and lonely that it scared him.

Quickly he slid down the tree and ran in panic towards the dark forest. He suddenly stopped in his tracks and anxiously cried, "Not good! I am running around aimlessly! If Rong'er comes looking for me, she won't find me!" Having had this thought he turned around and ran back; but he was lost again! He couldn't even find the place where he started.

The little red horse was following him closely, but when he ran among the bushes and climbed trees and soon the horse was also lost. The sky was growing dark and Guo Jing did not know what to do; so he simply sat on the ground and waited for Huang Rong. It was a good thing that that place was covered with thick green grass, so he was quite comfortable sitting down.

He started to get hungry and thirsty too. His mind wandered to the delicious food Huang Rong used to prepare for Hong Qigong and he was getting hungrier.

Suddenly a thought came into his mind. "What if Rong'er's father locked her up? She won't be able to rescue me. How can I let myself starve to death in this forest?"

He recalled he still had to sort out the enmity with Huang Rong's father; he also remembered he had not paid back his masters' kindness. Then his mind wandered to his mother in far away Mongolia; if he died here, who would take care of her? With these heavy thoughts he became tired and fell asleep.

It was deep into the night when he dreamt he was on a trip with Huang Rong. They visited a lake near Beijing. They got to a beautiful spot and Huang Rong was singing a tune in a soft voice. Out of the blue there came another sound singing along; it was a bamboo flute. He woke up, startled. The flute sound still lingered in the air. Guo Jing got up and looked around. The moon shone brightly in the sky, and the sweet fragrance of the flowers was thickened by the dark night. The flute sound came from a distance; he was not dreaming!

Guo Jing was delighted. He walked towards the flute sound following the path in front of him. It was a winding path, and sometimes there was no path in front of him, but the flute sound was still coming from the front. He remembered the pathways of the Cloud Manor; so he ignored the winding path and just went straight to the sound. If a tree or shrubs were in front of him, he simply climbed or jumped over them.

The flute sound was getting clearer. Guo Jing walked faster. Rounding a bend, he arrived at an area of white flowering shrubs. Layer upon layer of flowers glistened in the bright moonlight; so many they looked like a small white lake. In the middle of these white flowers he saw something big and tall, looking massive. Here the sound of the flute suddenly

changed. Sometimes high, sometimes low; sometimes the sound came from his front, sometimes it moved to his back. He thought the sound was coming from the east, but when he rushed to the east, the sound moved to the west; when he chased to the north, the sound swiftly moved to the south. It sounded like more than ten people were playing flutes all around him. This flute sound really drove him crazy.

After running around like that for a while Guo Jing's head was spinning, so he decided to quit running and walked directly towards that massive thing in the middle of white flower lake. It turned out it was a grave site. There was a stone in front of the tomb with this inscription: 'The Fragrant Burial Ground of Mistress Feng of Peach Blossom Island' [tao hua dao nu zhu feng shi mai xiang zhi zhong], in eleven large characters.

"This must be Rong'er's mother's tomb," Guo Jing thought. "Rong'er lost her when she was very small, it was really sad." He knelt down in front of the tomb and kowtowed four times to pay his respects.

The flute sound suddenly stopped when Guo Jing was kneeling. Everything around him was very quiet; but as soon as he stood up, the flute sound resumed in front of him. "I don't care if it brings luck or misfortune, I will follow the sound," Guo Jing thought.

Again he walked amongst the vegetation following the flute. And again sound of the flute changed its personality. First it sounded like laughter, but suddenly changed into anger; it affected his feelings no end. Guo Jing's pulse quickened, "How come this tune is so pleasant to my ears?" he was fascinated.

The tune increased its tempo, urging him to get up and dance. Guo Jing felt the urge, his face flushed and he felt his blood flowing ever faster through his hundreds of arteries. He immediately sat on the ground and meditated as Ma Yu had taught him: circulating his internal energy.

At first his heart was shaken, several times he felt the urge to stand up and dance to the tune. After breathing in and out several times, his heart calmed down, his mind became clear. No matter how the flute song changed, he heard it like the sound of the waves of the sea, or like a breeze in the tree tops. He felt his 'dan tian' bursting with energy; his whole body felt comfortable. No longer did he feel hunger or thirst. He knew that as he reached this state, external elements would not be able to affect him any longer; he slowly opened his eyes only to see in the darkness, about two 'zhang's away, a pair of bright eyes looking straight at him.

He was startled, "What kind of beast is that?" he thought while leaping back several steps. But suddenly those eyes disappeared. "This Peach Blossom Island is really strange," he thought, "even a fast leopard or a swift fox won't be able to move that fast." He hesitated for a moment and then heard fast breathing; it was a human's breathing. Then he realized, "It was a human being! Those sparkling eyes were his. I didn't see them anymore because he shut his eyes, but he is actually still here." Having this thought he laughed at his own foolishness; but it was unclear to him whether that person was a friend or a foe, so he did not dare to make a sound and just opened his eyes wide to observe quietly.

At this time the floating flute song carried a passionate, seducing feeling resembling a woman sighing and groaning, then murmuring softly; then at other times it raged wildly with desire.



Guo Jing was still young and although he had trained in martial arts since his childhood he did not know much about sexual relationships. He felt the flute affecting his emotions and the melody was enchanting to the soul, but he did not let it give too much thought. But it was not so with the other man; he was gasping for breath and groaning softly. It sounded like he was struggling with all his strength just to resist the enticement coming from the flute.

Guo Jing's heart was moved with compassion towards this man and slowly he went to him. The trees in this place were dense and the moon was bright, but the moonlight could not penetrate the thick branches and leaves. Guo Jing walked closer and only then he could vaguely see the man's appearance. He was sitting cross-legged. His hair was long, almost touching the ground and his eyebrows, moustache and beard were long also, covering his mouth and nose. His left hand was on his chest, his right hand on his back.

Guo Jing knew that it was one of the positions for cultivating internal energy that 'Scarlet Sun [dan yang zi], Ma Yu had taught him atop that barren hill on the Mongolian steppes. It was the technique for closing one's heart and mind. Whenever someone masters it to perfection, even if thunder rumbles and lighting flashes, or water gushes and creates landslides, it would not bother him at all. This man looked like he knew this advanced skill of internal energy cultivation; but why couldn't he control himself and feared the sound of the flute?

The flute music quickened and that man's body was swaying and twitching. Several times he jumped a few feet off the ground and after struggling with all his might he was finally able to sit down again. Guo Jing saw this cycle happen several times: he would be calm for a moment, then agitated, before calming down again, but the cycle was

getting shorter and shorter. Guo Jing knew that man was fighting a losing battle, so he started to worry for him.

The flute played two more intricate melodies softly. Suddenly the man shouted, "All right! All right!" and was about to jump up. Guo Jing realized the time was critical; without thinking he rushed forward and stretched out his hands pushing down on that man's shoulder. His right hand tapped the 'Big Spine' [da zhui xue] acupoint on his neck. He remembered when he was training on that Mongolian cliff; whenever his mind was troubled and could not achieve tranquility, Ma Yu would gently stroke him on his 'Big Spine' acupoint and that helped calm him. His internal strength was not as strong as Ma Yu's so he could not help this man to overcome the flute's sound; but because he struck the right spot the long-haired old man was able to calm himself. He closed his eyes and seemed like he was in control.

Guo Jing was happy inside; then someone scolded him. "Little beast! You ruined my great effort!" The flute had suddenly stopped. Guo Jing turned his head and did not see anyone, but that voice sounded like Huang Yaoshi. He became anxious and regretted his actions. "I don't know if this long-haired old man is good or bad and I thoughtlessly helped him. I've surely increased Rong'er's father's anger. If this old man is a monster or evil witch, then I just committed a big mistake?"

He heard the old man's breathing slowing down to steady breathing. Guo Jing refrained himself from asking the old man questions. He simply sat quietly opposite him, closed his eyes and used that time to meditate. Soon he was able to calm himself and achieve a state of emptiness. He lost track of time and opened his eyes when the morning stars began to dim in the dawn light.

The morning sun shone through the trees and flowers, illuminating the old man's face. Guo Jing could see him clearly now; his hair and beard were not entirely white and God only knows how many years a shaving knife had not touched his head. He looked like a cave man.

Suddenly the old man's eyes opened. His eyes were bright and twinkling. He smiled faintly and asked, "Which one of the Quanzhen Seven Masters is your master?"

Guo Jing saw his kindly countenance and was put at ease. He stood up and bowed respectfully, "Disciple Guo Jing pays his respect to Senior. I am the disciple of the Seven Heroes of Jiangnan."

The old man seemed surprised. "The Seven Heroes of Jiangnan; is that Ke Zhen'E and the others? How could they teach you the internal energy cultivation of the Quanzhen Sect?" he asked.

"Actually, Ma Dao Zhang [Taoist Priest Ma] spent two years teaching this disciple, but he did not permit me inside the Quanzhen Sect's gate and wall," Guo Jing answered. [Guo Jing meant that he was not taken as Ma Yu's official disciple.]

That old man laughed heartily and then made faces. He looked so funny, like a child playing jokes. "So that's how it is" he said, "How did you come to Peach Blossom Island?"

"Master Huang told me to come," replied Guo Jing.

The old man's face suddenly changed, "What for?" he asked.

"This disciple offended Master Huang," Guo Jing answered. "I come here to accept my fate."

"Are you telling the truth?" the old man asked.

“Disciple does not dare to lie,” answered Guo Jing.

The old man nodded, “Very good! Sit down!” he commanded.

Guo Jing sat on a big rock and he could see clearly that the old man was sitting inside a cave in a rock wall.

“Other than your Masters who else taught you martial arts?” the old man asked again.

“The Nine-fingered Divine Beggar, Benevolent Master Hong ...” Guo Jing said.

The old man’s face changed again, it was strange, like he was going to smile but restrained himself. “Hong Qigong also taught you martial arts?” he interrupted.

“Yes,” replied Guo Jing. “Benevolent Master Hong taught me the ‘Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms’.”

The old man’s face showed happiness and envy at the same time, “You know the ‘Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms’? That martial art is so amazing. How about teaching it to me? I will take you as my master.” But then he shook his head and said, “Won’t do! Won’t do! As the Old Hong’s disciple your energy must not be that strong. Did Old Beggar Hong teach you internal energy?”

“He did not,” Guo Jing answered truthfully.

The old man looked up and thought aloud, “He looks so young. Even if he cultivated his internal energy inside his mother’s womb, it would be at most eighteen or nineteen year’s worth of internal energy. How could he resist the flute sound, while I could not?” He was deep in thought for a moment; then he looked at Guo Jing from top to bottom and again from bottom to top. He stretched out his right

palm and said, "Push my palm; I want to test your martial arts."

Guo Jing complied; he extended his right palm and pushed. The old man said, "Qi' [internal energy] in your 'dan tian' [lower stomach region] and push hard!" Guo Jing exerted his strength. The old man pulled back his palm slightly then pushed hard while calling out, "Be careful!"

Guo Jing sensed a powerful force pushing him. He could not resist it, so he used his left hand to reinforce his right palm. Surprisingly, old man flipped his palm and pushed Guo Jing's wrist with four fingers. The power of these fingers was enough to send Guo Jing flying backwards seven or eight steps until his back hit a tree. Only then did Guo Jing manage to stand steady.

"His martial arts are not bad, but nothing extraordinary either," the old man muttered, "But how could he resist the Old Heretic Huang's 'Jade-Colored Tidal Wave song' [bi hai chao sheng qu]?"

Guo Jing felt his chest tighten; he was astonished, "This man's martial arts are about the same level as Shifu's and Master Huang's. How could there be an expert of his caliber on Peach Blossom Island? Could it be he is the Western Poison or the Southern Emperor?" As soon as he remembered 'Western Poison' his heart turned cold, "Did I fall for his trickery?" Quickly he lifted his palm in the sunlight and checked it. He did not see any inflammation or black marks and was relieved; at least he wasn't being poisoned.

"Can you guess who I am?" the old man laughed.

"Disciple heard people say that in the martial arts realm there are five experts. The Quanzhen's founder Venerable Wang has passed away; the disciples have met the 'Nine-

fingered Divine Beggar' Benevolent Master Hong and the Master of Peach Blossom Island. Could you be the Senior Ouyang or the Emperor Duan?"

"You thought my martial arts are comparable to the Eastern Heretic and Northern Beggar didn't you?" the old man smiled.

"This disciple's martial arts are mediocre and my experience modest, I do not dare to speak nonsense. But when Senior pushed me a moment ago, I can say with confidence that other than Benevolent Master Hong and Master Huang, I have never experienced such force," Guo Jing said.

The old man was delighted with Guo Jing's praise; his face looked like a child's happy face. "I am neither the Western Poison Ouyang Feng, nor the Emperor Duan," he smiled broadly. "Guess again."

Guo Jing hesitated. "This disciple has met somebody whose name was as well known as Benevolent Master Hong, Qiu Qianren. But that person's martial arts are just ordinary. Disciple is really not smart, I cannot guess Senior's honored name," he said.

That old man laughed heartily, "My surname is Zhou; can you guess now?" he asked.

"Ah, you are Zhou Botong?" Guo Jing blurted. As the words came out of his mouth Guo Jing froze. Mentioning someone's name, especially a Senior, could be considered disrespectful. He quickly bowed and apologized, "Disciple has shown disrespect, will Senior Zhou please forgive me."

he old man laughed, "You are right! I am Zhou Botong. My name is Zhou Botong, and you called me Zhou Botong; when did you show me disrespect? The Quanzhen Sect's

founder, Wang Chongyang, was my martial brother; Ma Yu, Qiu Chuji and the others are my martial nephews. You are not a Quanzhen disciple, you don't have to call me Senior this or Senior that; just call me Zhou Botong."

"How would disciple dare?" Guo Jing asked.

Zhou Botong had lived on Peach Blossom Island for a long time; he was bored and now Guo Jing suddenly came along. Talking with him he found relief; he was thrilled. Suddenly a strange thought came into his mind. "Little friend, what do you say you and I become sworn brothers?" he asked.

No matter how strange his words were, this was the strangest of all. Guo Jing's jaw dropped and he looked at Zhou Botong in disbelief; he thought Zhou was joking. After a while he opened his mouth, "This disciple is Priest Ma and Priest Qiu's junior; I should address you as my grand martial master."

Zhou Botong waved his hands. "My martial arts skill came from my martial brother. Ma Yu, Qiu Chuji and the others do not consider me their senior; they also did not respect me as a senior. You are not my son, I am not yours; we do not have older-younger generation difference." As he spoke he heard footsteps approaching; an old servant appeared carrying a food basket. Zhou Botong beamed, "Our food is here!"

The servant opened the basket and took out four dishes of food, two pots of wine and a woven basket full of rice. He placed the food in front of Zhou Botong on top of a big rock, poured out two cups of wine and stood silently to one side.

"Where is Miss Huang? Why doesn't she come looking for me?" Guo Jing asked. That servant shook his head, pointing to his ear and his mouth, signaling that he was deaf and mute.

“Huang Yaoshi punctured his ear drums. You can ask him to open his mouth wide and take a look,” Zhou Botong chuckled.

Guo Jing made a signal, asking that servant to open his mouth. Guo Jing was startled and frightened; that servant’s tongue had been cut in half.

“The servants of Peach Blossom Island are all like that,” Zhou Botong said. “You have come here and if you don’t die, you will end up like them.”

Guo Jing heard what he said and he was silent for a long time. “How could Rong’er’s father be so cruel?” he thought.

“That Old Heretic Huang tortures me every night,” Zhou Botong continued, “I don’t want to admit defeat to him. Last night I almost fell into his hands; if not for you, little brother, my more than ten plus years of effort resisting him might have crumbled in one evening. Come little brother, we have wine and food. Today we will take an oath to be sworn brothers; in the future we will share fortune and bear difficult times together. The year when Wang Chongyang and I became sworn brothers he also resisted in every way ... Why? Do you really not know? My sworn brother Wang Chongyang’s martial arts were much higher than mine; that was why he was not willing to swear brotherhood with me. Are your martial arts also much higher than mine? I don’t think so.”

“Junior’s martial arts are way below yours,” Guo Jing answered. “I don’t deserve to swear brotherhood with you.”

“If you say to swear brotherhood you have to have the same level of martial arts, then I have to swear brotherhood with Old Heretic Huang, or Old Poison,” Zhou Botong said. “That’s ridiculous! I only like to fight with them! Do you want me to swear brotherhood with this deaf and mute



fellow?" He pointed to that old servant and jumped up and down in a fit of rage.

Guo Jing saw his red face and he quickly said, "Disciple and Senior are two generations apart. If I follow Senior's directions, people will laugh at us and ridicule me. When I meet Priest Ma and Priest Qiu, how can I not be ashamed?"

"You have these many considerations. You certainly don't want to swear brotherhood with me because I am too old", he sputtered. Zhou Botong covered his face and cried while unconsciously pulling his beard.

Guo Jing nervously waved his hands, "Disciple will do whatever Senior instructs."

Zhou Botong cried even harder. "You said that because of my coercion, you reluctantly agreed; that doesn't count. When someone asks in the future, you will say that it was entirely my fault. I know you are not willing to call me your sworn brother."

Guo Jing was secretly amused. How could such an old man not act his age? He saw him pick up a dish and toss it outside; he did not want to eat any longer. The old servant promptly picked it up; he didn't know what was going on and he was terrified.

Guo Jing had no choice; suppressing a laugh he said, "Since Elder Brother had shown kindness, how could Little Brother not accept? Let us use earth in place of incense and become sworn brothers."

Zhou Botong smiled through his tears. "I have sworn to Old Heretic Huang that as long as I cannot defeat him, I will never leave this hole except for bowel movements or urinating. I will kowtow inside, you kowtow outside," he said.

"If you can't defeat Master Huang, then you will live in this hole all your life?" Guo Jing thought; but he did not say anything and simply knelt down on the ground.

Zhou Botong knelt alongside; with a clear voice he said, "Today the Old Urchin Zhou Botong and Guo Jing are swearing a brotherhood [lit. 'jin lan' – golden orchid]. We will share good fortune together and will face difficulty together. If I break this oath, may my martial arts perish so that I can't even fight a puppy or a kitten."

Guo Jing heard him call himself 'Old Urchin', and his oath was sort of peculiar; he could not restrain a smile. Zhou Botong stared at him. "What are you smiling at? Quickly say your oath." Guo Jing quickly recited his oath; then two people poured wine on the ground. Guo Jing then paid his respects to his elder brother.

Zhou Botong laughed heartily and loudly shouted, "That's enough! That's enough!" He poured some more wine and drank. "The Old Heretic Huang is very stingy; he serves me insipid wine only. One day a little miss came and brought me some good wine; it's a pity she never came back."

Guo Jing remembered Huang Rong had told him how she stole some wine and brought it to Zhou Botong; because of that she was scolded by her father. This caused her to leave the island in anger. It seemed like Zhou Botong was not aware of it. Guo Jing had been hungry for the whole day; he did not want to drink any wine but he ate five big bowls of rice. Now at least he was full. As soon as the two finished eating, the old servant cleaned up and took the leftovers back.

"Brother," Zhou Botong asked, "How did you offend the Old Heretic Huang? Tell your big brother."

Guo Jing then narrated how he accidentally killed Chen Xuanfeng in his childhood; how at the Cloud Manor he had fought and defeated Mei Chaofeng; how Huang Yaoshi made things difficult for the Six Freaks of Jiangnan; how because of that he had made a promise to come to Peach Blossom Island within a month to die; he told Zhou everything.

Zhou Botong loved to listen to stories; he bent his head, squinted, and listened with enthusiasm. When Guo Jing only recounted something briefly he would ask for every detail of it. Every time Guo Jing paused even for the slightest time he urged him, "Then what happened?"

"Then I arrived here," Guo Jing finally said.

Zhou Botong hesitated a moment. "Hmm...so turns out that pretty little girl is the Old Heretic Huang's daughter. She is good to you. Why did she disappear soon after arriving on the island? There must be a reason, maybe Old Heretic Huang locked her up."

Guo Jing's anxiety showed on his face, "This disciple also had this thought ..."

"What did you say?" Zhou Botong snapped as his face changed color.

Guo Jing knew he made a mistake and quickly said, "Little brother made an indiscreet remark, please don't mind me, Big Brother."

Zhou Botong smiled. "The way you address me cannot be wrong. If you call me any name, then you'd better call me 'wifey', or 'mommy', or 'daughter'. No, don't make a mistake," he said. Guo Jing agreed.

Zhou Botong leaned his head and asked, "Can you guess how I ended up here?"

"Brother is just about to ask," Guo Jing said.

"It's a long story, I will tell to you completely," Zhou Botong said. "Do you know when the five experts, the Eastern Heretic, Western Poison, Southern Emperor, Northern Beggar and the Central Divinity, were having a sword meet on Mount Hua?"

Guo Jing nodded, "I've heard people talk of it."

"It was in the dead of winter at Mount Hua," Zhou Botong continued. "The peak was covered with a heavy snow. Five people were having a meet there; their hands contended in martial arts for seven straight days and nights. In the end the Eastern Heretic, Western Poison, Southern Emperor, and the Northern Beggar admitted that my martial brother, Wang Chongyang's martial arts was number one in the world. Do you know why those five people were having that sword meet at Mount Hua?"

"This, brother has not heard," Guo Jing replied.

"It was because of a scripture ..." Zhou Botong said.

"The 'Nine Yin Manual'!" Guo Jing exclaimed.

"That's right!" Zhou Botong said. "Brother, you are young, but your knowledge of Wulin matters is not shallow. Do you know the origin of the 'Nine Yin Manual', then?"

"That I actually do not know," Guo Jing replied.

Zhou Botong playfully pulled his ears and long hair and his face showed that he was very pleased with himself. "A moment ago you told me a very interesting story, now ..."

“What I told you was not a story; that really happened to me,” Guo Jing interrupted.

“What is the difference? As long as it is good to listen to,” Zhou Botong said. “Some people spend their lives eating, sleeping, urinating and defecating. If those people tell me every single detail of their life, the Old Urchin will die of suffocation.”

Guo Jing nodded his head. “That’s true,” he said. “Then why doesn’t Big Brother tell the story of the ‘Nine Yin Manual’ for little brother to hear.”

“The Emperor Hui Zong in the year of Zheng He wanted to compile Taoist books and scriptures from all over the world. He wanted to publish the work, which consisted of 5481 Chapters altogether. They were called the ‘Taoist Canon of Everlasting Life’ [wan shou dao zang]. The Emperor commissioned someone to do the work; he was called Huang Shang ...”

“He was also surnamed Huang?” Guo Jing asked.

“Bah! What’s so special about the family name Huang?” Zhou Botong spat. “This person had nothing to do with the Old Heretic Huang Yaoshi; don’t get any wrong ideas. There are numerous people surnamed Huang in this world; the ‘yellow’ [huang] dog or yellow cat are also surnamed Huang.”

Guo Jing thought that a yellow dog and a yellow cat did not necessarily have ‘huang’ as their surnames, but he did not want to debate him; so he let him continue with his story.

“This Old Heretic Huang is not as smart as that Huang Shang. He was extremely intelligent ...” Zhou Botong continued. Guo Jing wanted to say, “It turns out he was also

an extremely intelligent person,” but that thought stopped at his mouth.

“This Huang Shang was very afraid he might make a mistake in the writing of the canon; because if the Emperor found out later, he would surely lose his head. Therefore, he read and re-read each volume to make sure his work was error-free. Unexpectedly, after several years of studying the scriptures, he became very proficient in the Taoist doctrines; he had found the profound truths of martial arts. He did not have a master, so he trained himself in internal and external energy cultivation and became a grand master of martial arts. Brother, this Huang Shang was many times smarter than you are. I don’t have his kind of intelligence and I don’t think you do either.”

“Naturally,” Guo Jing said. “If I were to study more than five thousand chapters of scripture, it will take me a life time just to read them from beginning to the end. How would I comprehend the martial arts inside them as well?”

Zhou Botong sighed. “These kinds of intelligent people still exist in the world today,” he said, “But if you meet this kind of people, chances are, you will face unfortunate events.”

Guo Jing did not agree with his view and secretly thought, “Rong’er is very intelligent; but since I met her I have always found good luck. How can he say ‘unfortunate’?” But he was not the kind who liked to argue, so he kept his thoughts to himself.

“Huang Shang had mastered the martial arts, yet he still held an office in the government,” Zhou Botong continued. “There came a time when there suddenly arose a religious movement in the kingdom; they called themselves the ‘Ming Cult’ [ming jiao]. It was said that this movement originated in central Asia; a place called Persia. The followers of this

Ming Cult: first – did not worship the ‘Supreme Master Lao’ [tai shang lao jun translator note: I think he was a Taoist Deity]; second – did not worship ancestor spirits; third – did not worship Buddha. They only worshipped an old foreign devil. They did not eat meat or drink wine; they were vegetarians. The Emperor Hui Zong only believed in Taoism; so as soon as he found out about this devil cult he issued an imperial decree assigning Huang Shang to eradicate it. Unexpectedly, there were many martial arts masters among the members of the cult. They were fearless of death and fought Huang Shang and his troops, rendering them useless. After several battles Huang Shang and his troops suffered heavy losses. Huang Shang was indignant. He went out and challenged the Devil Cult’s martial arts masters to a one-to-one combat. He personally killed several ‘imperial priests’ [fa wang] and some envoys. How could he know that the people he killed were disciples of well-known Wulin characters; some were their martial uncles, aunts, brothers, sisters or their immediate families. Of course those people were enraged and they came together to face him. They scolded him for not handling the affairs according to Wulin customs, to which Huang Shang replied, ‘I am a government officer and not part of the Wulin world. What do I know about your Wulin customs?’ Those whose family or relatives were killed argued, ‘If you are not part of the Wulin world, then how do you know martial arts? Are you saying that your master only taught you martial arts but did not tell you anything about the Wulin customs?’ Huang Shang replied, ‘I didn’t have a master.’ Of course they did not believe him; so they became involved in a heated argument. What do you think happened?”

“They began to fight each other,” Guo Jing said.

“Obvious, wasn’t it?” Zhou Botong said. “Huang Shang’s martial arts were strange and none of his enemies had seen it before. Because of this he could kill some of them quite easily. However, his enemies were numerous and he was also injured in the fight, so in desperation he ran away. Those enemies then wiped out his parents, wife and children completely.”

Listening to this part Guo Jing heaved a sigh. He thought that people who practiced martial arts would inevitably kill others. This Huang Shang was no different; had he not practiced martial arts, he would not have experienced such tragedy.

“That Huang Shang fellow ran away to a deserted place and hid himself there,” Zhou Botong continued. “There he tried to recall his enemies’ martial arts one by one. He painstakingly pondered as to how to defeat each and every one of them. He decided that as soon as he succeeded in developing the countering martial arts, he would go back and seek his revenge. A long time passed before he finally was able to master the new martial arts. He was very happy and expected that very soon he would be able to avenge his family. Thereupon he left the mountain to seek his enemies. Unexpectedly, the people he was looking for had disappeared. Can you guess what happened to them?”

“Perhaps his enemies found out his intentions and they knew his martial arts were very good, so they were frightened and hid from him,” Guo Jing guessed.

Zhou Botong shook his head, “No, no. When my martial brother told me this story he also asked me to guess what happened and I also said the same thing. I even made seven or eight other guesses but none of them was right.”



“Well, if Big Brother guessed seven or eight times yet did not hit the target then I don’t have to make any other guesses at all. Even if I guess seventy or eighty times I will certainly guess incorrectly,” Guo Jing said.

Zhou Botong roared with laughter, “No chance, you have no chance at all! All right, since you admit defeat I won’t ask you to guess anymore. Actually several dozens of his enemies had died.”

Guo Jing uttered a cry of disbelief. “That’s strange! Could it be that his friends or maybe his disciples avenged him and killed all his enemies?” he asked.

Again Zhou Botong shook his head, “No, no. You missed by a hundred and eight thousand li. He did not have any disciples. He was a government official and his friends were scholars, not martial artists; how could they avenge him?”

Guo Jing scratched his head. “Could it be that they were plagued by some disease and died in some kind of epidemic?”

“Also incorrect. His enemies were scattered; some lived in Shandong, some came from Huguang, several were from Hebei and Liangzhe. How could they die in the same epidemic?” Zhou Botong asked; but then he exclaimed. “Ah! Yes, yes! That’s right! Some epidemics could kill you no matter where you are, even if you ran to the ends of the earth. Can you guess what kind of epidemic was it?”

Guo Jing mentioned typhus, smallpox, dysentery and six or seven other types of diseases; but Zhou Botong shook his head every time. Finally Guo Jing exclaimed, “Foot-and-mouth disease!” Then he faked surprise, covered his mouth, stood up and tapped his head with his left hand and burst into laughter. “I was kidding! Foot-and-mouth disease is the

plague of cattle on the Mongolian steppe; it won't attack humans."

Zhou Botong also burst out in laughter. "The more you guess the weirder you become. Huang Shang looked everywhere before he finally found one of his enemies. It was a woman. When they fought originally, she was only a sixteen or seventeen year old girl, but when Huang Shang found her, she was a sixty-year old granny ..."

Guo Jing's jaw dropped. "This is really weird! Ah, right, she must have disguised herself as an old lady so Huang Shang wouldn't recognize her."

"She did not disguise herself," Zhou Botong answered. "Just think: Huang Shang had several dozen enemies and each one of them was a martial arts expert; each came from a respectable martial arts school or family. Can you imagine how profound and complicated each of their skills were? He wanted to defeat each person's unique skill; just how much time did he painstakingly spend to achieve such a result? He was hiding in a remote mountain area and diligently trained. Day and night only martial arts occupied his mind, he did not care about anything else; without him realizing it, it had taken more than forty years altogether."

"More than forty years?" Guo Jing was astonished.

"That's right," Zhou Botong asserted. "When you are totally absorbed in learning martial arts, forty years will pass quite quickly. I have been here for fifteen years yet it did not feel like it was that long. When Huang Shang saw that young girl had turned into an old granny, his heart was heavy with emotions. That old lady was sick, bedridden and was dying. Without him raising a hand she would die in a few days. The heartache and hatred of dozens of years just vanished without a trace. Brother, everybody has to die. The

epidemic I was asking you about earlier was death. When your time comes, you cannot run away.”

Guo Jing silently nodded. Zhou Botong continued, “My martial brother and his seven disciples’, day in and day out, dedicate themselves to achieving the perfection of life. But tell me: is it really possible to cultivate a divine body that won’t see death? That was the reason I did not want to follow the ox-nosed way of living.”

Guo Jing was lost in thought. Zhou Botong continued, “Some of Huang Shang’s enemies had been about forty or fifty years of age; add another forty years plus, how could they not die? Ha ... ha ... ha ... Actually he did not have to trouble himself by training his martial arts and developing new techniques; all he had to do was outlive his enemies. Forty plus years and Heaven would take care of his personal enemies for him.”

Guo Jing nodded. “Well then, should I look for Wanyan Honglie to avenge my father or not?” he wondered in his heart.

Zhou Botong again said, “However, learning martial arts diligently could bring endless pleasure to one’s life. If one did not practice martial arts, what other interesting thing is worth doing? There are endless toys and gadgets in the world, but after playing with them for a while you will get bored eventually. With martial arts, the more you play, the more interesting it becomes. Brother, don’t you agree?”

Guo Jing only made an ‘hmm’ sound noncommittally, showing neither his approval nor disapproval. He admitted that knowing martial arts could be fun; but it was also hard work. He had trained in martial arts since he was very young and he could not say the training was ‘fun’. He had to work hard and suffer, without a single day of leisure.

Zhou Botong saw he was not showing much enthusiasm, "Why didn't you ask me what happened next?" he asked.

Guo Jing hastily said, "Right! What happened next?"

Zhou Botong was sulking, "If you don't prompt me every now and then I will lose my eagerness for telling you the story."

"Yes, yes, Big Brother, what happened next?" Guo Jing prompted.

"Huang Shang thought, 'I realize I am old now and do not have too many years for good works.' He had taken those several dozens of years of pain to master the martial arts techniques of almost every martial arts school in the world. But after all those years, who would enjoy his work? How could he let his life-long work be wasted just like that? Therefore, he decided to compile the techniques he had mastered into a two-volume book. What would that be?"

"What is it?" Guo Jing asked.

"Ay! Don't tell me you cannot guess this one," Zhou Botong said.

Guo Jing thought for a moment, then asked, "Is it the 'Nine Yin Manual'?"

"We have talked for half a day about the origin of the 'Nine Yin Manual'; why do you still ask?" Zhou Botong scolded.

Guo Jing smiled, "Well, Little Brother was afraid to make another incorrect guess."

Zhou Botong continued, "After compiling the 'Nine Yin Manual', Huang Shang wrote it as a disguised literary book; my martial brother later found out about it. Huang Shang had hidden the book in a very secret place so that for

dozens of years nobody knew of its existence. For some reason this book appeared later and the Wulin world was troubled. Everybody wanted to get hold of it. It was a dog-eat-dog situation. My martial brother said that the heroes who fought over this book and lost their lives came from all parts of the Wulin world; the number was over a hundred people. Every time someone got hold of it and practiced for half-a-year or a year, somebody else would find that person and snatch the book. Who knows how many times the cycle repeated or how many lives it cost. The one who got it would try to avoid others, but the pursuers were so numerous and in the end they would always find that person. Sometimes they used force, sometimes trickery and I don't know how many times the book changed hands."

"If that's the case, then this book is actually the most damned thing for mankind," Guo Jing said. "If Chen Xuanfeng did not have this book he would have been able to live peacefully with Mei Chaofeng in some remote village and Island Master Huang would not have looked for him. If Mei Chaofeng did not have this book, she would not be in her wretched condition today."

"Brother, why do you have such a negative feeling towards the book?" Zhou Botong asked. "The martial arts contained inside the 'Nine Yin Manual' are very profound and divinely wonderful. If someone is able to learn even a little bit of it, how could that someone's life not be changed? Even though it has created disasters, what does that have to do with it? Didn't I say that not everybody was dead because of it?"

"Big Brother," Guo Jing said, "That is because you are so fascinated with martial arts."

"That goes without saying," Zhou Botong smiled. "Those who practice martial arts have endless pleasure. Common people are so foolish; some love to study to become

government officials; some love gold or exquisite jewels; some love beautiful women; but those who find pleasure in martial arts, won't those people be able to do much more in times of emergency?"

"Little Brother has practiced a little bit of shallow martial arts, but I have not yet learned to have any endless pleasure from it," Guo Jing said.

Zhou Botong sighed. "Silly kid, silly kid; then why did you practice martial arts?" he asked.

"Masters wanted me to practice, I practiced," Guo Jing replied.

Zhou Botong shook his head. "You are really dumb," he said. "I am telling you: a man may not like the food he eats; he may not love his own life, but he cannot not practice martial arts."

Guo Jing replied while thinking, "This Brother of mine is really addicted to martial arts and that's why he acts so crazy." He said, "I noticed that the 'Twin Killers of the Dark Winds' practiced the martial arts of the 'Nine Yin Manual'; it was completely evil. Those absolutely cannot be practiced."

Zhou Botong shook his head. "Those 'Twin Killers of the Dark Winds' did not train correctly. The 'Nine Yin Manual' is upright and honest, how could it be evil?"

Guo Jing had seen Mei Chaofeng's martial arts with his own eyes, so he did not believe what he heard.

Zhou Botong asked, "Where were we in the story?"

"You talked about the heroes of the world fighting over the 'Nine Yin Manual'," replied Guo Jing.

“That’s right!” Zhou Botong said. “Afterwards, the troubles kept getting bigger and more complicated so that the likes of the Quanzhen Sect’s Leader, Peach Blossom Island Master Old Heretic Huang and Beggar Clan Leader Hong had to intervene. Those five people agreed to meet at Mount Hua and have a contest. Whoever possessed the highest martial arts skill would get the book.”

“And the book fell into your martial brother’s hand,” Guo Jing said.

Zhou Botong’s eyes lit up. “That’s right! My martial brother Wang and I were good friends; he had not yet become a priest when we became good friends. Later on he taught me martial arts. He said I practiced martial arts like crazy and was too determined; it did not fit well with the Taoist way of seeking peace and perfection. That is the reason why, though my martial arts are from Quanzhen, my martial brother did not let me become a Taoist priest. That, precisely, was what I expected. Amongst my martial brother’s disciples, Qiu Chuji was the one with the highest martial arts skill. My martial brother did not like it and said Qiu devoted too much time practicing martial arts and neglected to cultivate his Taoist faith. He said that whoever wanted to practice martial arts must do so diligently; while those who entered the Taoist way must do so with a simple heart. Those two did not go together very well. Ma Yu inherited my martial brother’s Taoist faith, but his martial arts are actually inferior to Qiu Chuji and Wang Chuyi.”

“The Quanzhen Sect Master Wang, how did he become both a Taoist saint and a martial arts master?” Guo Jing asked.

“His natural talent was that incredible. He was able to master martial arts quite easily, while I had to practice hard and diligently.” Zhou Botong answered. “Where were we in

the story? Why did you divert my attention with your question?"

Guo Jing smiled. "You were talking about your martial brother obtaining the 'Nine Yin Manual'."

"That's right," Zhou Botong said. "After he had the book in his possession, he did not learn anything from it. He put the book inside a stone box and buried it underneath the flagstone where he sat meditating daily. It seemed strange and I asked him what was going on. He smiled but did not say anything. I became anxious, but he simply told me to go and think about it. Go ahead and try to guess... why did he do that?"

"Was he afraid somebody might come and steal it from him?" Guo Jing said.

Zhou Botong repeatedly shook his head, "No, no! Who would dare to steal a Quanzhen Sect Master's belongings unless that person was bored of his own life?"

Guo Jing pondered for a long time. Suddenly he jumped up and exclaimed, "That's right! That book should be hidden away really well; better yet, it should have been burned."

Zhou Botong was astonished; he stared hard at Guo Jing. "My martial brother at that time said the same thing; but every time he was going to do it, he hesitated at the last moment. Brother, you are not that smart, how did you guess correctly?" he asked.

Guo Jing blushed. "I thought that Venerable Wang's martial arts were already number one in the world; even if he trained from the manual himself, he would still be number one. I also thought that his intentions at the sword meet on Mount Hua were not to be the number one but to obtain this 'Nine Yin Manual'. He wanted it, not to benefit from it,



but rather to avoid further bloodshed amongst the heroes of Wulin."

Zhou Botong raised his head and looked up to the sky; he looked like one whose spirit had left him. He was silent for a long time. Guo Jing became anxious, he was afraid he had said something wrong and had offended this new brother of his with the strange temperament. Finally Zhou Botong sighed and asked, "How could you think of this truth?"

"I don't know," said Guo Jing, scratching his head. "I just thought that because this book had caused numerous deaths; even if it was a precious book, it would still be better if it were destroyed."

"I know his reasoning, but I have never understood it," Zhou Botong said. "My martial brother often times said that I am smart and have a natural talent for learning martial arts; also I have the determination to achieve success; but, he said, first of all I am too fascinated with it, and second, I do not have a caring heart towards other people. Even if I had a lifetime to train myself hard; I will never achieve perfection. At that time I listened to him, but did not believe him and thought, 'What does training myself to move my fist or kick or use a blade have to do with the state of my heart?' These past ten years or so I have been pondering over it and I can no longer believe it. Brother, your heart is upright, your mind is broad. It's a pity that my martial brother is dead, otherwise I am sure he would have liked what he saw in you and I am sure he would have bestowed his unparalleled martial arts on you. If only he hadn't died ..." Remembering his late brother, he suddenly bent over a rock and wept bitterly.

Guo Jing did not really understand what he was saying, but seeing his brother crying miserably could not help but feel grief in his own heart. After a while, Zhou Botong suddenly

raised his head and said, "Ah! Our story is not finished yet; let us finish it, then we can cry some more. Where were we? Why didn't you persuade me not to cry?"

Guo Jing smiled and said; "You were telling me about how Venerable Wang hid the 'Nine Yin Manual' underneath a flagstone."

Zhou Botong slapped his thigh and said, "That's right! He had hidden the book underneath a flagstone. I asked him if I could take look at it, but he scolded me; afterwards I did not dare to ask him again. The Wulin world again enjoyed peace and quiet for some time. Then martial brother died; and at the time of his death there was quite a disturbance in the martial arts world."

When Guo Jing heard the tone of his voice he became anxious, knowing that the disturbance must not be small. He opened his ears and listened attentively. Zhou Botong continued, "Martial Brother was aware that he could not avoid his imminent death; therefore, he arranged for us to take care of his unfinished business. He even asked me to take the 'Nine Yin Manual' out and bring it to him. He prepared a fire and was about to burn the book. But after stroking the book for a long time he heaved a deep sigh and said, 'This book is a Senior's lifelong effort; how can it be destroyed by my hand? Water can float a boat, yet it can also sink a boat; we'll have to see if the future generations make good use of it. However, I forbid our Sect's disciples from practicing what is in this book, so that people cannot accuse me of having wanted to own this book for personal gain.' After saying those words he closed his eyes and died. That very evening, it was not even the third hour yet, something happened in the temple."

"Ah!" Guo Jing uttered a cry; Zhou Botong continued, "That night I stayed up with the Quanzhen's seven first

generation disciples and kept a vigil at the side of the coffin. Around midnight enemies came. They were all skilled pugilists. The Quanzhen Seven Masters immediately went out and engaged the enemies in battle. They were afraid the enemies would desecrate their master's remains. I was the only one left guarding the coffin. I heard someone outside shouting, 'Hand over the 'Nine Yin Manual' quickly, otherwise your temple will be burned to the ground.' I looked outside and could not help feeling cold fear in my stomach. I saw a man standing on a tree branch and his body was swaying following the branch movements. It was an extraordinary demonstration of lightness kungfu. At that time I thought, 'This lightness kungfu is superior to mine; if he is willing, I'd like to take him as my master.' But then I changed my mind, 'It's wrong! It's wrong! This man must have come here to steal the 'Nine Yin Manual'; not only can I not bow to him to become his disciple, but I must fight him.' I did not know him, but whether I wanted it or not, I had to fight him. So I jumped outside and fought with him on the tree. I fought him for thirty or forty moves and I was getting frightened; the enemy was a few years younger than I was, but his martial arts were so fierce that I had a hard time keeping up with him. Finally I got hit on my shoulder by his palm and fell down from the tree."

"You have such high martial arts skills, yet you lost to him. Who was that?" Guo Jing wondered.

Zhou Botong answered his question with another question, "Can you guess?"

Guo Jing thought for a while then exclaimed, "Western Poison!"

"Ah!" Zhou Botong was amazed. "How did you guess?"

Guo Jing replied, "Little Brother thought that the people whose martial arts were higher than yours must be the people who were involved in the sword meet at Mount Hua. Benevolent Master Hong is straightforward and honest. The Emperor Duan is an Emperor, he would not stoop so low to steal someone else's possession. Little Brother does not know Island Master Huang's real character very well, but he is a proud man and not the kind of person who would take advantage of someone else's precarious condition and make a thief of himself!"

From the flower shrubs outside a shout suddenly came, clear and loud, "The little animal has good judgment!"

Guo Jing leaped towards that voice, but that person's movements were too swift. Guo Jing could not even see his shadow; only the trees were still swaying and flower petals fell down to the ground in abundance.

"Brother, come back!" Zhou Botong called out. "That was the Old Heretic Huang. He's already far away."

Guo Jing returned to the front of the cave, while Zhou Botong commented, "Old Heretic Huang is proficient in the amazing and weird five-element techniques; he arranged this vegetation according to Zhuge Liang's maze-laying arts of the past." [For those interested in more background on the eight trigrams (ba gua) one source on the net is the Feng Shui Institute.]

"Zhuge Liang's laws?" Guo Jing was amazed.

Zhou Botong sighed, "That's right. Old Heretic Huang is well versed in music, chess, calligraphy and painting, medicine, divination and astronomy; as well as farming and irrigation; economics and military strategy. Nothing is hidden from him, nothing that he is not proficient at. It's too bad he likes to give the Old Urchin a hard time and when

we fight, I will not necessarily win. Once he flies east and west amongst this vegetation nobody will be able to catch him.”

Guo Jing was silent for a long time. He was thinking about how amazing Huang Yaoshi was and was unable to restrain feeling captivated. After a while he remembered the story and asked, “Big Brother, you were hit by the Western Poison and fell down from the tree. What happened next?”

Zhou Botong slapped his thigh. “Right! This time you did not forget to remind me about the story,” he exclaimed. “I was hit by Ouyang Feng’s palm; the pain entered my heart and lungs and I wasn’t able to move for half a day. I saw him rushing into the mourning hall, but I couldn’t do anything; I was badly injured. Then I gritted my teeth and, risking my own life, I chased him. I saw him standing in front of my martial brother’s coffin. He stretched his hand to take the book from the table in front of the coffin. I was groaning inwardly; I was not his match and my martial nephews had not come back from fighting the other enemies outside. At this critical moment there was a loud cracking sound; the coffin’s wooden lid burst open and flew away, leaving a gaping hole in the coffin.”

“Did Ouyang Feng use his palm to destroy Venerable Wang’s coffin?” Guo Jing asked.

“No, no!” Zhou Botong replied. “It was my own martial brother who used his palm strength to break open the lid.”

After listening to this strange and absurd tale Guo Jing’s eyes opened wide and his jaw dropped. He was speechless.

## Chapter 17 - Mutual Hands Combat

Translated by Frans Soetomo



*The Old Urchin Zhou Botong and the Eastern Heretic Huang Yaoshi had a marbles competition, with the 'Nine Yin Manual' and the Peach Blossom Island's Soft Hedgehog Armor as bets. Huang*

*Yaoshi's newly-wedded wife watched the proceedings from the sidelines. Though a marbles competition was child's play, this particular game had its own intricacies.*

“Did you think my martial brother became a ghost?” asked Zhou Botong, “Or did you think he came back to life again? No not at all. He was faking death.”

“Ah!” Guo Jing gasped. “Faking death!”

“Yes,” Zhou Botong answered. “A few days before he died, my martial brother found out that the Western Poison had been lurking around the temple and waiting for him to die so he could steal the book. Therefore, my martial brother stopped his breathing by using his excellent internal energy and feigned death. He knew that if he told his disciples they would not grieve convincingly. Then, since Western Poison is so crafty, he would see through the ruse straight away; that was the reason nobody knew martial brother’s plan. Anyway, my martial brother flew out from the coffin and struck Western Poison with the ‘Solitary Yang Finger’ [yi yang zhi]. Ouyang Feng clearly saw me from outside the window as I was beside my martial brother’s death bed. He obviously saw us placing the body inside the coffin. Now, suddenly, my martial brother jumped out of the coffin; he was so shocked that the blood drained from his body. He was so frightened by my martial brother that he did not move. My martial brother’s ‘Solitary Yang Finger’ hit him on the eyebrow and broke his many years of training the ‘Toad Stance’ [ha ma gong]. Ouyang Feng then escaped back to the west and I’ve never heard of his returning to the Central Plains. My martial brother laughed long and hard as he sat cross-legged on a table. I knew launching the ‘Solitary Yang Finger’ consumed a lot of his energy, so he needed to meditate and restore his strength and I did not bother him. I ran outside and helped my martial nephews

get rid of the other attacking enemies. When my nephews heard that their master was not dead, their happiness was beyond belief. We rushed back into the temple but then stopped dead in our tracks ...”

“What happened?” Guo Jing asked nervously.

“I saw my martial brother’s body skewed to one side and his face looked strange,” Zhou Botong said. “I rushed to him and checked his pulse; his body was cold as ice. He was really dead this time. Martial brother’s last words were for us to divide the “Nine Yin Manual” into two parts, so that if somebody should steal one, the whole book would not be lost. I took the first part with the intention of hiding it later on, and brought the second part to the south to hide it on a mountain peak somewhere. On my way south I came across the Old Heretic Huang.”

“Ah!” Guo Jing exclaimed.

“Even though Old Heretic Huang’s behavior is queer and he is very arrogant, he is unlike the Western Poison who knows no shame and dared to come to steal the book,” Zhou Botong said. “Old Huang happened to be with a lady who turned out to be his wife.”

“That must be Rong’er’s mother,” Guo Jing thought, “I wonder if she knows that her mother was involved in this matter?”

“I saw them so happy together,” he heard Zhou Botong continue. “He said they were just married. I thought Old Heretic Huang was smart, what good would a wife do for him? So I teased him about the marriage. Old Heretic Huang did not get angry; he even invited me to have a drink. I told him about my martial brother playing dead and wounding Ouyang Feng. Old Heretic Huang’s wife was listening to my story; she asked me if she could take a look



at the book. She told me she did not understand any martial arts, she was merely curious as to what kind of book had caused the deaths of numerous masters of the Wulin world. Naturally I did not let her. Now the Old Heretic Huang loved his young wife very much and he wanted to make her happy, so he said to me, 'Botong, this woman does not know any martial arts at all. She is still young and loves to see amusing things. What's the problem with letting her take a look? If I, Huang Yaoshi, cast a single glance toward your book, I will immediately gouge out my eyeballs and give it to you.' Old Heretic Huang is a man who can be ranked among the best of this present age; his words, without doubt, carry a lot of weight. But to let somebody see the book is a grave matter, so I shook my head. Old Heretic Huang was not happy. He said, 'How can it be that I don't understand your difficulty with the book? If you agree to let my wife take a look, there will be time when this old Huang repays the Quanzhen Sect's kindness. But if you don't agree, that is entirely up to you. Who said that I have to have your friendship? I don't even know any of your Quanzhen disciples.' I understood very well his meaning. This man will do what he says. He felt uncomfortable giving me a hard time, but he could make things difficult for Ma Yu, Qiu Chuji and the others. His martial arts skill is too high; it was not a good idea to provoke his anger."

"That's true," said Guo Jing. "Priest Ma, Priest Qiu and the others are not his match."

Zhou Botong continued, "At that time I said to him, 'Old Heretic Huang, if you are angry come and find me, the Old Urchin. Why do you have to look for my martial nephews? Won't that make you 'the big bully the little'?' When his wife heard me mentioning my nickname, 'the Old Urchin', she burst into laughter and said, 'Big Brother Zhou, you love to play around; let us forget this whole thing and let us play

around together. I don't want to see your precious book anymore.' She turned her head to Old Heretic Huang and said, 'I think the "Nine Yin Manual" was stolen by that Ouyang fellow, that's why Big Brother Zhou could not show it to me. If you keep pestering him I am afraid you will only make him lose face.' Old Heretic Huang smiled and said, 'That's right. Botong, let me help you find that Old Poison and deal with him. His martial arts are above yours.'"

"Looks like Rong'er inherits her mother's odd intelligence," Guo Jing thought. To Botong he said, "They were just provoking you!"

"I know that!" said Zhou Botong, "But I didn't want to lose to them. So I said, 'The book is in my possession and I have no problem with letting sister-in-law taking a look. But you inferred the Old Urchin cannot defend the book; you have to prove it to me.' The Old Heretic Huang smiled, 'If we fight, we might injure our friendship. You are the Old Urchin; let us play like little kids.' His wife clapped her hands and called out, 'Goody, goody! Why don't you two compete by playing with marbles?' before I could answer him."

Guo Jing showed a faint smile. Zhou Botong continued, "I am an expert in playing marbles; so I shouted, 'Let's play marbles then, do you think I am afraid of him?' Madame Huang smiled and said, 'Big Brother Zhou, if you lose, you will let me take a look at your book. But if you win, what do you want in return?' The Old Heretic Huang immediately said, 'The Quanzhen Sect has its treasure, don't you think Peach Blossom Island also has one?' He took out a shiny black cloth completely covered with thorns. Can you guess what it is?"

"Soft Hedgehog Armor [ruan wei jia]," Guo Jing said.

“That’s right, so you know of it,” Zhou Botong said. “The Old Heretic Huang said, ‘Botong, your martial arts are outstanding so naturally you don’t need any protection; but someday you will meet a girl urchin and soon have little urchins. This ‘Soft Hedgehog Armor’ will be invaluable for protecting the child; nobody will bully him. If you can beat me at marbles, this Peach Blossom Island treasure will be yours to keep.’ I said, ‘I won’t meet any girl urchin so naturally a little urchin will not be born; but your ‘Soft Hedgehog Armor’ is famous in the Wulin world. If I win it, I will wear it outside my clothing and then I will wander around Jianghu and let the people know that the Peach Blossom Island Master lost to the Old Urchin.’ Madame Huang interrupted, ‘Stop talking, after both brothers’ play then we can talk again.’ So we reached an agreement. Each man had to put nine marbles into nine holes, so I made eighteen holes altogether. Whoever put in nine marbles first will win the game.”

Listening to this part Guo Jing recalled his own childhood playing marbles with his sworn brother Tolui on the steppe, a smile broke out on his face. Meanwhile Zhou Botong continued, “I always carry plenty of marbles in my pocket, so we went outside to play our game. I paid close attention to Madame Huang’s movements and I found out she really did not know any martial arts. I went down and made some holes in the ground. I let Old Heretic Huang choose his marbles first, and he did. Then we started our game. His special hidden projectile skill, the ‘Divine Flicking Finger’ [tan zhi shen tong] is well known throughout the world. He knew his skill with small objects was superior to mine. But he did not know that this game had a secret; there was a slight difference in the way I made the holes. I made them in such a way that when a marble went in, it would jump right back out. You have to shoot the marble with the perfect amount of strength; it had to be just right with a

little bit of pulling force behind it, so the marble will stay in the hole.”

Guo Jing never thought that playing marbles on the Central Plains would be so complicated; Mongolian kids would never be able to compete. He heard Zhou Botong proudly continue, “The Old Heretic Huang launched three marbles and all were right on target. But as soon as they entered the holes they would jump back out. He did not know my secret. In the meantime I flicked five marbles and all went into the holes and stayed. His secret projectile skill was very good; he tried hard to catch up to me by flicking three more marbles, while I put another marble in a hole. I was already in the lead, how could I let him catch up? He was having a hard time with the marbles. Secretly I was smug, thinking that his defeat was imminent; even the Heavens wouldn’t be able to help him. Ay! Who knew that the Old Heretic Huang would use a dirty trick to gain victory? Can you guess what he did?”

“He hurt your hand using his superior martial arts?” Guo Jing guessed.

“No, no,” Zhou Botong said. “The Old Heretic Huang is bad, but he is not stupid; he wouldn’t use such a foolish method. He knew he was going to lose, so he sent his energy into the marbles; he flicked three marbles and hit my last three. Mine were smashed while his marbles stayed intact.”

“Ah! Then you didn’t have any marbles left!” Guo Jing exclaimed.

“I had to helplessly watch him put his marbles into the holes one by one. Thus, I lost!” Zhou Botong said.

“But that doesn’t count!” Guo Jing said.

"That was what I said," Zhou Botong answered. "But Old Heretic Huang said, 'Botong, we have agreed that whoever got all nine marbles inside the holes, he wins. Blame your own inadequacy! It was your own fault that you don't have enough marbles to put into the holes. Therefore, you lost!' I still think he was being deceitful, but I had to admit I didn't expect his move. Also, even if I wanted to destroy his marbles I couldn't do what he did; I can't hit a marble without smashing my own. So I secretly admired his ability. I said, 'Sister-in-law Huang, I will let you see the book but I want it back by sundown.' I said that because I was afraid they would say, 'We didn't say how long we might borrow the book; we haven't finished looking at it so why are you taking it back?' If that happened, the book would be in their hands for ten or even a hundred years."

Guo Jing nodded his approval. "Right! Luckily Big Brother is smart and could foresee this. If it was me, I would fall for their scheme."

Zhou Botong shook his head, "Speaking of intelligence, who on earth can be compared to the Old Heretic Huang? I don't know how he did it, but he managed to find a wife who was as smart as he is. At that time Sister-in-law Huang only showed a faint smile, she said, 'Big Brother Zhou, you are known as the Old Urchin, but you are smart. You are afraid it will be the same as Liu Bei borrowing the city of Jingzhou forever, aren't you? Don't you worry; I will sit right here in front of your eyes and I won't hide in a secret place. If you are feeling uneasy, you can stay by my side and stand guard.' I listened to her say this and I took the book from my pocket and handed it over to her. Sister-in-law Huang took it and walked to a tree and sat on an upturned rock.

The Old Heretic Huang saw I still showed some trepidation on my face and said, 'Old Urchin, in this present age, how many people can defeat us two in martial arts?' I replied,

‘Nobody can necessarily defeat you; but to defeat me, including you there are four or five people!’ Old Heretic Huang smiled, ‘You flatter me. Eastern Heretic, Western Poison, Southern Emperor and Northern Beggar are four people and each one has his own strengths; none could defeat any of the others. Ouyang Feng’s ‘Toad Stance’ has already been broken by your martial brother, so for ten years he won’t be able to compete with us. There is ‘Iron Palm Floating on Water’, Qiu Qianren and I’ve heard his martial arts are good, but because he did not attend the ‘Sword Meet on Mount Hua’ [hua shan lun jian], I am not sure that his martial arts are superb. Old Urchin, I believe that other than these people, you are number one in terms of martial arts. If we combine our strength, nobody can beat us.’ I said, ‘Naturally!’ Old Heretic Huang then asked, ‘Why then, are you so anxious? With both of us standing right here; who in the world could come and steal your precious book?’ He was very reasonable, so I felt better.

I saw Madame Huang flipping one page after another and she read attentively from the beginning; her lips moved slightly which I found a little funny. The ‘Nine Yin Manual’ contains high-level secrets of martial arts; even if she was well versed in literature, I am afraid she wouldn’t comprehend even half a word. She read slowly from the beginning to the end, taking her time. I waited impatiently until she finally flipped the last page. I thought she was done, but she unexpectedly turned to the first page and read again. But this time she read quickly and finished in the time needed to drink a cup of tea. She gave the book back to me and smiled, ‘Big Brother Zhou, you have been deceived by the Western Poison; this is not the ‘Nine Yin Manual’!’ I was shocked. I asked, ‘What do you mean it isn’t? Obviously this was left behind by my martial brother and it looks good to me!’ Madame Huang replied, ‘What use is this book? Ouyang Feng obviously swapped your book for

this cheap copy on how to do fortune telling and divination’.”

“Could it be that Ouyang Feng swapped the books before the Venerable Wang came out of the coffin?” Guo Jing asked.

“That was what I thought at first,” Zhou Botong replied. “But I’ve known for some time that Old Heretic Huang is very shrewd; I could not really believe what his wife said either. Madame Huang saw me standing silently; she knew I doubted her words, so she asked, ‘Big Brother Zhou, how do you know this is the real ‘Nine Yin Manual’?’ I told her, ‘Ever since my martial brother took possession of the book, nobody has ever seen its contents. Martial Brother had said that he fought for seven days and seven nights to avoid further bloodshed in the Wulin world, not for his personal gain. Therefore, he forbade the Quanzhen disciples from learning any martial arts from the books. Madame Huang then said, ‘Venerable Wang had a just and upright heart, truly deserving of endless admiration. Even so, there are other people who would not hesitate to deceive him. Big Brother Zhou, you go ahead and take a look at the book.’ I hesitated, remembering my deceased martial brother’s last words that I did not dare to defy. Madame Huang continued, ‘This is a book of divination that is available anywhere in Jiangnan and not worth half a ‘wen’ [Chinese coin]. Besides, even if this book is the real ‘Nine Yin Manual’, it is all right to look as long as you do not learn anything from it, isn’t it?’

So I opened the book and looked at the first page. To me the book seemed to be describing methods and techniques for practicing martial arts; where was fortune telling and divination stuff? Madame Huang said, ‘I have played with this kind of book since I was five; I know the contents from the beginning to the end. Of we Jiangnan kids, nine out of

ten are familiar with it. If you don't believe me, just listen to this.' Having said that, words started flowing like water from her mouth; she recited the book from the beginning to the end. I looked at the book to see if she really was reciting it from memory. Indeed, not a single word was wrong. My body turned cold, as though I'd been plunged into a hole full of ice. Madame Huang also said, 'No matter which page you want me to recite, as long as you read the beginning, I can recite the rest for you. I have read this kind of book since I was little, so I won't forget its contents.' I chose several sections just as she said and she did recite them without hesitation.

The Old Heretic Huang burst out in laughter. I was really angry; I tore the book to pieces and then burned it. Old Heretic Huang said, 'Old Urchin, you don't need to lose your urchin's temper. Let me give you the 'Soft Hedgehog Armor'.' I wasn't aware I'd fallen for his scheme; I thought I looked so upset to him that he wanted to ease my feelings. I was upset, but how could I take the treasure of Peach Blossom Island? So I thanked him without taking his gift. I went back to my hometown and closed the door on the world. I wanted to practice my martial arts. I knew at that time that I was not Ouyang Feng's match, so I was determined to train hard for five years. I thought I would go to the west to take the book back from the Western Poison. My martial brother entrusted me with the book and the Old Urchin could not keep it safe. How could I face martial brother in the underworld?"

"The Western Poison is so crafty. I know you must deal with him; but wouldn't it be a lot better if you take Priest Ma, Priest Qiu and the others with you?" Guo Jing asked.

"Ay! I can only blame my own arrogance," Zhou Botong said, "After suffering from that humiliation I did not want to talk to Ma Yu and the others. If I did they would certainly



see something was amiss. Several years later there arose a rumor amongst the Jianghu people that the Peach Blossom Island disciples, the 'Twin Killers of the Dark Winds' had gotten hold of the 'Nine Yin Manual'. They had mastered several kinds of exquisite martial arts from the book and created havoc everywhere. At first I did not believe it, but the rumor got stronger. A year later, Qiu Chuji came to my home. His visit was in connection with the 'Nine Yin Manual' affair. He said that the book really had fallen into the Peach Blossom Island disciples' hands. I was fuming mad and said, 'Old Heretic Huang is not worthy to be my friend!' Qiu Chuji was taken aback, 'Martial Uncle, why did you say Huang Yaoshi was not worthy to be your friend?' I told him, 'He went to get the book back from Western Poison without consulting me and did not give it back to me.'"

"I think he intended to do it, but right after he got the book back it was stolen by his renegade disciples," Guo Jing reasoned. "I know he was quite angry because of this, so he cut the ligaments in the legs of his other innocent disciples and expelled them from his school."

Zhou Botong shook his head. "You are as naive as I was; if this affair happened to you, you would surely be bullied without knowing it," he said. "That day Qiu Chuji discussed martial arts with me and we talked at length before he finally left. Two months later he suddenly reappeared. He had visited Chen Xuanfeng and Mei Chaofeng, the couple that had stolen the Old Heretic Huang's book. They were practicing the 'Nine Yin White Bone Claw' and 'Heart Destroying Palm', two evil martial arts. He took a big risk to eavesdrop on the 'Twin Killers of the Dark Winds' conversation and found out that Old Heretic Huang did not get the book from Ouyang Feng. Not at all ... he'd stolen it from my hands."

"You burned the book. Did Madame Huang swap the book and gave you a fake one?" Guo Jing asked.

"I guarded against that possibility from the beginning," Zhou Botong said. "When Madame Huang looked at the book, I did not dare to move even half a step from her side. She did not know martial arts. Even if her hands and feet were swift she could not get away from we who practice hidden projectiles. No, she did not make a swap; she merely recorded it in her mind!"

Guo Jing did not understand. "How did she record it?" he asked.

Zhou Botong answered his question with another, "Brother, when you are reading a book, how many times do you have to read it until you commit what you read into your memory?"

"If it is easy ... maybe thirty or forty times. If it is difficult or long, probably seventy or eighty times, or even a hundred times. Even after I read it a hundred times, I still cannot guarantee its accuracy," Guo Jing replied.

"Speaking of brain power, I am afraid you cannot be considered smart," Zhou Botong said.

"Your Brother is dumb by nature," Guo Jing admitted. "It doesn't matter whether I am studying literature or martial arts, I am always very slow."

Zhou Botong sighed. "Let's not talk about studying literature," he said. "Just talk about practicing martial arts. When you learned a fist or palm technique, didn't your masters have to teach you dozens of times before you could understand it?"

Guo Jing's face was red with shame. "That's true," he said. "Sometimes I knew it but couldn't recall it, and sometimes I remembered it but could not apply it."

"But there are people in the world who, simply by watching other people do a stance, will be able to remember it forever," Zhou Botong said.

"Totally correct!" Guo Jing exclaimed. "Island Master Huang's daughter is just like that. When Benevolent Master [Enshi] Hong taught her martial arts, at most he would teach her twice; it was very seldom that he had to repeat the lesson three times."

"That girl is so smart," Zhou Botong slowly said, "Let's just hope she won't share her mother's short life! That day when Madame Huang borrowed my book she only read it twice, yet she did not miss a single word. After we bade farewell she wrote down everything for her husband to see."

Guo Jing could not restrain his amazement. He was silent for a while only to say, "Madame Huang did not understand what she was reading; yet she was able to memorize the whole thing. How can there be such an intelligent person on the earth?"

"I am afraid your little friend, that Huang girl, is also capable of doing that," Zhou Botong said. "Anyway, after listening to Qiu Chuji I was ashamed. I immediately summoned the Quanzhen Sect's seven first generation disciples to discuss this matter. Everybody agreed we should deal with the 'Twin Killers of the Dark Winds' and get the book back from them. Qiu Chuji said, 'The 'Twin Killers of the Dark Winds' martial arts skills may be high, We are your juniors so Martial Uncle does not need to go into action personally; otherwise the heroes of Jianghu

would say that the older generation bullied the younger one.' I thought he was right, so I assigned one or two of them to find the 'Twin Killers of the Dark Winds' while the rest shadowed from out of sight to guard against the 'Twin Killers' escaping."

Guo Jing nodded his head in agreement, "If all the Quanzhen Seven Masters went into action the 'Twin Killers of the Dark Winds' wouldn't have a chance." His mind wandered to the time when Priest Ma Yu along with his six masters masqueraded as the Quanzhen Seven Masters atop the barren Mongolian hill.

"They pursued the 'Twin Killers' as far as Henan, when the two unexpectedly disappeared," Zhou Botong continued. "The Quanzhen Seven tried to get information and as it turned out another disciple of Old Heretic Huang, Lu Chengfeng had gathered dozens of heroes and valiant people of the Central Plains to fight those two with the intention of capturing them, sending them back to Peach Blossom Island and handing them over to the Old Heretic Huang. Nevertheless, they were still able to escape and vanished without a trace."

"No wonder Village Master Lu hated his martial brother and martial sister so much; he was unjustly expelled from his school," Guo Jing said.

"Since I couldn't find the 'Twin Killers of the Dark Winds', naturally I looked for Old Heretic Huang. I carried the first volume of the 'Nine Yin Manual' because I was afraid I might lose this one as well. Upon arrival at Peach Blossom Island I scolded the Old Heretic Huang, but he said, 'Botong, Huang Yaoshi always means what he says. I said I wouldn't cast a glance at 'your' book and when did I look at it? The 'Nine Yin Manual' that I saw was the one recorded by my wife, certainly not your book.' His words sounded

reasonable, but I was furious so I spoke harsh words to him and asked to talk to his wife. He smiled bitterly and led me to the main hall. As soon as we were there I was shocked. It turned out Madame Huang had passed away. There in the main hall was her memorial tablet.

I was going to pay my respects to her spirit but Old Heretic Huang sneered and said, 'Old Urchin! You don't have to be pretentious on my behalf. If not for your damned 'dog fart manual' [gou pi zhen jing] my wife wouldn't have left me.' I was startled, 'What?' I asked. He didn't answer and only looked at me with angry eyes; then tears started rolling down his cheeks. After a long while, he began to tell me what really happened.

Madame Huang wrote down the book the first time for her husband's sake. Huang Yaoshi then found out that the book in his hands was the second volume which was harmful if used without knowing the first volume. So he decided to set the book aside while he was trying to get hold of the first volume. Who would have thought that the book would be stolen by Chen Xuanfeng and Mei Chaofeng? Madame Huang wanted to comfort her husband and she was quietly determined to rewrite the whole book.

First of all, she did not understand the meaning of what she wrote; she merely memorized the words. Secondly, it had been several years since she wrote it the first time; how could she remember everything? At that time she was entering the eighth month of her pregnancy. After much painstakingly hard thought she was able to re-write about seven or eight thousand words, but not every word was accurate. Her heart and mind were exhausted and because of that she gave birth to a baby girl prematurely. The baby was healthy, but her own condition was like a lantern that had run out of oil. Even though Huang Yaoshi's medical skill

is peerless, in the end, he was not able to save his beloved wife's life.

Old Heretic Huang always loved to vent his anger and blame others; during this time after his wife passed away, he was like a madman and talked incoherently to me. I knew he was grieving so I did not want to argue with him. I simply smiled and said to him, 'You are a pugilist, yet you invest so much feeling towards the husband and wife relationship. Aren't you afraid you are becoming the laughing stock of other people?' 'My wife was different,' he said. I told him, 'Your wife died and now is the best time to train your martial arts. If it were me, that is exactly what I would expect of myself. The earlier your wife died the better. Congratulations! Congratulations!'"

"Ah!" Guo Jing gasped. "How could you say such thing?"

Zhou Botong eyes rolled, "I said what I was thinking; what's wrong with that?" he snapped. "But that Old Heretic Huang got angry and without saying anything he struck me with his palm and we fought. In the end I had to stay in this stupid place for fifteen years."

"Did you lose to him?" Guo Jing asked.

Zhou Botong smiled, "If I'd won, I wouldn't be here. He hit me until I was spitting up blood. I ran away until I found this cave. He pursued me, wanting to break my legs. He also wanted to snatch the first volume of the 'Nine Yin Manual' and burn it in front of his wife's memorial tablet. I hid the book in a hole and sat at the cave entrance guarding it. I said that if he resorted to force I would destroy the book immediately. He said, 'I will find a way to force you out of there.' I said, 'We'll see!'"

Just like that and I have been here for fifteen years. That man is arrogant, but he is not desperate yet, so I am sure

he won't put poison in my food. But he has used every means possible to force me out of here. I leave the cave only to urinate and defecate so he won't have any opportunity to sneak in. Only I have to live with this stench. Sometimes I pretend to have a bowel movement. His heart itches to lay his fingers on it, but he ended up enjoying the smelly thing." He ended his narration by laughing heartily.

Listening to his story Guo Jing was fascinated. He found this big brother of his to be smart and witty. Zhou Botong continued, "After fifteen years he started to attack my heart and mind, but so far I've been able to defend myself. Last night I was almost broke; fortunately a ghost or angel brought you here and you helped me. If not, this book would certainly have fallen into Old Heretic Huang's hands. Ay! Old Heretic Huang's 'Jade-Colored Tidal Wave Song' contains strong internal energy, very profound."

Guo Jing listened to him recounting this tale of gratitude and grudges; his heart was troubled. "Big Brother, what will you do now?" he asked.

Zhou Botong smiled, "I will continue our competition. We'll see if Old Heretic Huang outlives me, or I'll live a few years longer than him. I told you the life story of Huang Shang a while ago; he outlived all his enemies."

Guo Jing felt this was not a good idea, but he didn't have anything better, so he asked, "How come Priest Ma Yu and the others did not come to rescue you?"

"Most probably they don't even know I am here," Zhou Botong said. "Even if they do, the vegetation on this island is so strange that unless Old Heretic Huang himself gives consent, other people won't be able to enter Peach Blossom Island. Also, even if they come to rescue me, I won't go. I

haven't finished the competition with Old Heretic Huang yet."

After talking with Zhou Botong for half a day, Guo Jing decided that even though this man was old, he was filled with childlike innocence and always spoke straightforwardly and without any pretensions.

In the meantime the sun had climbed high in the sky. The old servant came to deliver their meal. After finishing eating Zhou Botong continued, "I have stayed on Peach Blossom Island for fifteen years, yet my time was not totally wasted. Here my heart and mind are clear, without any distractions. Here I have achieved what would take twenty-five years to achieve elsewhere. Although I know I have advanced greatly, it's too bad I didn't have a sparring partner. I had to use my left hand to fight my right hand."

Guo Jing was astonished. "How can the left hand fight with the right hand?" he asked.

"I pretend my right hand is the Old Heretic Huang and the left hand is the Old Urchin. The right hand attacks, the left hand neutralizes that attack and launches a counterattack, like this," Zhou Botong said, then moved his hands to battle each other.

At first Guo Jing thought it was very funny; but after several moves he realized that the stances were wonderfully mysterious. He couldn't help but feel great admiration. People who practice martial arts, regardless as to whether they are barehanded or wield a saber or thrust a spear, will always use both hands either to attack or to defend. But Zhou Botong was different. He used one hand to attack and the other to defend; each attack was fierce and always aimed at vital points, while the defending hand would parry and counterattack with no less fierceness. It truly was like



two people fighting each other. Guo Jing had never seen nor heard of anything like this before.

After watching Zhou Botong fight himself for a moment Guo Jing commented, "Big Brother, why don't you use your feet too?"

Zhou Botong halted and smiled, "Not a bad observation! You could see through my moves. Come, come! You try!" While speaking thus he stretched his palm to attack. Guo Jing also stretched his to parry.

"Careful! I am going to push you to the left," Zhou Botong said. As soon as he finished speaking he exerted his energy. Guo Jing was ready, even before Zhou Botong warned him he had prepared himself to use the 'Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms'. Two great forces collided and Guo Jing staggered back seven or eight steps. He felt his arm become sore and numb.

"This time I borrowed strength from my feet and you were pushed back," Zhou Botong said, "Now I am not going to use my feet. You try again."

Guo Jing followed his bidding to attack again, but suddenly he felt a pushing and pulling force. He was unable to keep steady, so he fell forward and his forehead hit the ground. He crawled as he tried to stand up; he was in a daze.

Zhou Botong smiled, "Do you understand?"

"No, I don't," Guo Jing replied.

"I developed this technique through training and meditation after toiling for more than ten years inside this hole," Zhou Botong said. "My martial brother once told me about the technique of using emptiness to gain victory. At that time my understanding of Taoist principles was still

shallow. I heard him but I didn't understand. About five years ago I was moving my hands when it suddenly dawned on me that I could develop a palm technique using that principle. I was unsure about it since it was only a theory and I have never tried it in real combat. Brother, come and fight me again. Please don't fear the pain. I am going to make you fall a few more times."

He saw Guo Jing hesitate, so he tried to persuade him again, "Good Brother, I have been here for fifteen years and always longed for someone to come and train with me. Several months ago Old Heretic Huang's daughter came and talked with me to ease my boredom. I was thinking of training with her, but she did not return the next day. Good Brother, I'm certainly not going to hit you too hard."

Guo Jing saw both of his hands were itching to move and his face showed eagerness that was hard to resist, so he agreed and said, "So what if I fall a few more times?" He launched his palm and fought a few stances; but it seemed that Zhou Botong's palm was sometimes void of strength. He was about to fall again when Zhou Botong's left hand suddenly hit his shoulder from below. His body was sent somersaulting in the air and he fell to the ground hard. His shoulder was hurting badly.

Zhou Botong's face showed regret and he said, "Good Brother, I can't let you fall for nothing. Hear me out and I'll teach you this technique." Guo Jing endured the pain and crawled near to him.

Zhou Botong said, "In Lao Tse's [the founder of Taoism] 'The Book of the Way' [dao de jing] there is a saying: 'a clay utensil is useful because it is empty, a room is useful because it is empty.' Do you understand this saying?" [There are several spellings Lao Tse's name and several translations of the name of his book. I chose these.- ed]

Guo Jing's literary knowledge was limited so naturally he did not understand the saying. He smiled sheepishly and shook his head.

Zhou Botong took a rice bowl they'd used earlier. "This bowl is empty inside, that's why we can fill it with rice. If it was a solid clump of clay, how could we put food inside it?" he asked.

Guo Jing nodded and thought, "It is a very simple truth, but I've never thought about it."

"Likewise a house can be occupied by people because it has four walls and windows and doors in those walls," Zhou Botong added. "What good is it if the building is made of solid brick without windows and doors?"

Guo Jing nodded again; his heart was more open to this truth.

Zhou Botong continued, "Our Quanzhen Sect's highest martial art is based on these two characters 'empty' [gong] and 'soft' [ruo]. It was called so because 'lacking accomplishment does not necessarily mean weak, lacking fullness does not necessarily mean empty.'"

Following these deep and profound thoughts Guo Jing listened attentively and pondered deeply.

Zhou Botong added, "In terms of energy exertion, your master Hong Qigong's martial arts are on the external side of the spectrum. Even though I know Quanzhen Sect's martial arts, I am not his match. But I am afraid that once you reach certain level of external type martial arts you cannot go much higher. Not so with the internal type of martial arts, the type that my martial brother practiced. The time when my martial brother won the title 'Number One in the Martial Arts World' he was not just lucky. If he

was still alive today and with the additional ten years of training, if he again fought Eastern Heretic, Western Poison and the others, I believe he would probably only need half a day, not seven whole days and nights, to subdue them.”

“Founder Wang’s martial arts were truly amazing; Brother is unfortunate not to have made his acquaintance,” Guo Jing said. “Benevolent Master Hong’s ‘Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms’ are the pinnacle of the ‘hard’ type of martial arts; but a moment ago Big Brother made me fall to the ground using the worlds ‘softest’ type of martial arts, isn’t that so?”

Zhou Botong laughed. “That’s true, that’s true,” he said. “Although the soft can subdue the hard, I wouldn’t be able to push you that easily if your ‘Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms’ was as fierce as Hong Qigong’s. It all depends on the depth of your comprehension. Do you remember the move I used to push you down just a moment ago? Try to remember it well.” And then he carefully explained how to move the hand and how to exert the energy. He knew Guo Jing’s comprehension was slow, so he took his time explaining everything.

Guo Jing tried the move dozens of times; fortunately he had a good foundation in profound internal energy techniques from the Quanzhen Sect, so he was able to grasp it, albeit slowly.

Zhou Botong was elated and said, “Brother, if your pain has lessened, let me make you fall one more time.”

Guo Jing laughed. “Pain is nothing,” he said, “But I am afraid I won’t be able to remember your lesson.” While speaking he was still trying hard to memorize everything.

Zhou Botong had childlike enthusiasm so he kept urging, “Is it enough? Have you memorized it? Come on, quickly!”

But his nagging was actually disturbing Guo Jing's mind. After some time was he finally able to memorize the move. So again he charged towards Zhou Botong and again he fell down.

Day and night those two trained together. Guo Jing was a young man, so he did not need too much sleep; but even when he did, Zhou Botong wouldn't let him. He kept urging him to train. Guo Jing fell down seven or eight hundred times. His body was swollen, hurt all over and covered with purple bruises. Fortunately he was strong, so he just gritted his teeth and doggedly learned and finally mastered Zhou Botong's special skill which he'd created during his fifteen years inside the cave, the seventy-two move 'Vacant Fist' [kong ming quan].

The two were so engrossed in training their martial arts that they did not know how many days passed. Guo Jing thought about Huang Rong all day, but since he was unable to seek her, he had to be content with waiting patiently. Several times he wanted to go with the mute servant who delivered their meals to find her; but every time, Zhou Botong called him back.

One day right after lunch Zhou Botong said, "You have mastered the entire 'Vacant Fist'. After this I won't be able to make you fall so easily; so we have to change the way we play."

"Very well. How should we play?" Guo Jing asked, laughing.

"We will play as though four people were fighting each other," Zhou Botong replied.

"Four people?" Guo Jing was perplexed.

"Absolutely," Zhou Botong said. "Four people! My left hand is one person, my right the other and your pair of hands are

the two other people. Four separate individuals and nobody help anybody. Four people in a tangled battle! That should be more interesting."

Guo Jing's interest was piqued. "It certainly is interesting; too bad I cannot separate my left and right hands," he smiled as he said it.

"I mean to teach you that later," Zhou Botong said. "For now, let us just have a three-way fight." His hands made two people and attacked Guo Jing immediately. He separated himself into two different entities and each hand launched a different stance. They did not complement each other and it was completely different to one person using two hands. When his left hand was giving Guo Jing a hard time, his right hand would come to Guo Jing's rescue. Likewise when his right was gaining the upper hand, his left fought his right. When Guo Jing gained the upper hand, Botong's hands would fight together like two people facing one opponent. In short, it was like three separate individuals fighting with each other. After fighting for a while they stopped for a rest.

Guo Jing thought this way of playing was very amusing; but he could not help but remember Huang Rong. He thought that if she was here, the three people would be able to fight as six individuals. He was sure Huang Rong would be very interested.

Zhou Botong was full of enthusiasm. As soon as Guo Jing caught his breath he taught him how to divide his hands into the 'Mutual Hands Combat'. This technique was actually more difficult than the 'Vacant Fist'.

There is a saying, 'The mind cannot be divided,' and something along the same line, 'The left hand drawing a square, the right hand drawing a circle, is not a good habit.'

But this 'Mutual Hands Combat' technique was exactly that: dividing one's mind into two. And the way to train it was by drawing a square with the left hand and a circle with the right hand. Guo Jing practiced doing the drawings. Initially his square resembled a circle and his circle looked like a square. He painstakingly practiced for a long time before he finally got the hang of it and both hands could simultaneously draw a perfect square and circle at will.

Zhou Botong was very excited. "If you hadn't practiced our Quanzhen's internal energy cultivation, which enables you to combine inner and outer strength, how could you master this 'Mutual Hands Combat' technique so quickly?" he said. "Now, use your left hand to launch the 'South Mountain Fist' technique [nan shan quan] and your right hand the 'Yue Maiden Sword' technique [yue nu jian]." These were the martial arts Guo Jing learned from Nan Xiren and Han Xiaoying. Guo Jing knew these techniques by heart, but launching them at the same time, one with each hand, was actually very difficult.

Zhou Botong was dying to play the 'four persons mutual combat', so he urged Guo Jing to train and he did not stop giving instructions and pointers. A few days later Guo Jing had mastered the 'Mutual Hands Combat' technique. Zhou Botong's delight was boundless. "Come, come!" he urged, "Your left hand and my left one form an alliance against your right hand and mine. Let us have a martial arts contest."

Guo Jing was still young, how could this kind of game not interest him? Immediately his right hand fought Zhou Botong's left while his left hand fiercely fought Zhou Botong's right. No one had ever seen or heard of this kind of battle.

While they were fighting each other and themselves, Zhou Botong gave Guo Jing pointers unceasingly on how to attack swiftly and fiercely and how to form a stable defense. Guo Jing listened and committed each and every one of them to memory.

Zhou Botong only wanted to have an interesting playtime, but Guo Jing's mind came up with other thoughts. One day when they were playing, he thought, "If our legs can also be divided, wouldn't two people be able to fight as eight individuals?" But he knew if he brought this up, Zhou Botong would go on indefinitely, so he refrained from saying anything.

Several more days passed. Guo Jing and Zhou Botong fought as four separate individuals. Zhou Botong was having fun; he fought and laughed heartily. Guo Jing's skill was still shallow, so when one of his hands was unable to defend, the other involuntarily would come to its rescue. Zhou Botong's fists moved rapidly and Guo Jing was not able to keep fighting as separate individuals, so he often became one individual fighting two people, as in the 'three person mutual combat'. But his two hands launched different moves, so it was like two Guo Jings fighting together hand-to-hand against two opponents.

Zhou Botong laughed heartily, "You are fighting without regard to the rules," he said.

Guo Jing jumped back. He was silent for a while then opened his mouth, "Big Brother, I have been thinking of something."

"What is it?" Zhou Botong asked.

"Well, your hands can launch completely different moves. Why can't they work together like two people facing a common enemy? This technique can be very useful; if your



enemy is strong, you can divide your mind and help yourself. Although the force won't be doubled, the stances would enjoy a great advantage."

Zhou Botong had created the 'Mutual Hands Combat' technique out of boredom while living in the cave alone. It never occurred to him that he could actually use the technique in real combat. Now that Guo Jing reminded him of it a thought suddenly flashed back and forth in his mind. He suddenly leaped out of the cave and walked back and forth at the cave entrance, laughing incessantly.

Guo Jing saw the sudden change in his actions, like an evil spirit possessed him; he became anxious and called out, "Big Brother, what happened to you? What is it?"

Zhou Botong did not answer but kept laughing. After a while he said, "Brother, I am coming out of this hole! I am not going to urinate, I don't need to have a bowel movement, but I am coming out."

"You are!" Guo Jing exclaimed.

Zhou Botong smiled, "Right now my martial arts are number one in the world, why should I fear Huang Yaoshi? I only hope he will show up so I can beat him really good."

"Are you sure you can defeat him?" Guo Jing asked.

"Actually my martial arts are still a notch below his, but by dividing my mind I can be two people against one; nobody can defeat me. Huang Yaoshi, Hong Qigong, Ouyang Feng, their martial arts are superb; but how can they defeat two Zhou Botongs?" Guo Jing was delighted; what Zhou Botong said seemed very reasonable.

"Brother," Zhou Botong continued, "You understand this 'Mutual Hands Combat' technique; all you need is just a few

more years of practice and then your martial arts skills will be doubled." As they chatted, the two became more and more excited.

Before this time, Zhou Botong was afraid Huang Yaoshi would come and make things difficult for him; but now he hoped Huang Yaoshi would show up. He would beat him up and leave this awfully smelly cave forever. He impatiently looked outside hoping to catch a glimpse of Huang Yaoshi's shadow. He would've dashed out to seek him if he hadn't known the pathways on the island were arranged mysteriously.

That night the mute servant came to deliver their dinner. Zhou Botong grabbed his neck and said, "Quickly tell Huang Yaoshi to come, tell him to test my new technique!" But the old servant only shook his head.

Zhou Botong swore and uttered some indistinct remark before he suddenly realized, "Bah! I forgot you are deaf and mute!" Turned his head to Guo Jing he said, "Tonight we must eat really well." Then he reached out to grab the food basket.

Guo Jing's nostrils caught a delicious smell coming from the basket, unlike the meals they usually got. He hastily opened the basket and saw two small dishes of vegetables with a big bowl of chicken cooked with winter-picked mushrooms...one of his favorites. With a thumping heart he took a porcelain spoon to scoop a spoonful of the soup. It tasted exactly like the one Huang Rong prepared for him, so he was certain it was from Huang Rong. His heart thumped even harder. Quickly he looked at the basket to see if there was anything unusual. He found a box with ten steamed buns inside. One of them had the image of a gourd, carved with a nail. The marking was so subtle that if he had not paid attention he would surely have missed it. Guo Jing

knew this bun was unusual. With a trembling hand he picked up the bun, broke it into halves, and found a wax pill inside. Guo Jing observed that Zhou Botong and the old servant were not looking his way, so he quickly slipped the pill inside his pocket.

This time the two men ate their dinner without caring about its taste: one was eating while thinking of how to have the peerless martial art in the world. While the right hand grabbed a steamed bun the left hand threw some fists, so both hands were very busy. Sometimes they fought each other while the mouth was chewing. The other person wanted to eat as fast as he could so that he could see what Huang Rong had hidden inside the wax pill.

Zhou Botong ate the last steamed bun with some effort and with a noisy slurp he finished the soup too. The old servant cleaned up and took the basket away. Guo Jing hurriedly pulled out the wax pill, crushed it, and took out the paper hidden inside. It was indeed Huang Rong's handwriting. It said, 'Jing ge ge, please do not worry. Father and I are reconciled. I will carefully arrange to ask him to release you.' The letter was closed with two characters, 'Rong'er'. Guo Jing was ecstatic; he showed the letter to Zhou Botong.

Zhou Botong laughed. "Leave it to me," he said. "He can't refuse to release you; we will compel him to, so there's no need to ask him nicely. If he refuses, I will imprison him in this hole for fifteen years. Aiyo! That's not right! What if, in fifteen years, he finds the secret of the 'Mutual Hands Combat'?"

The sky was gradually becoming dark. Guo Jing sat cross-legged and was going to practice internal energy. But his mind kept wandering back to Huang Rong. For a long time he could not concentrate. Finally he was able to calm himself and his chest relaxed; he started to breath evenly. A

sudden thought came to his mind: if he could divide his mind to control two hands and use two different martial arts, why not try dividing his breathing into two? So he closed one of his nostrils and practice breathing using only one nostril.

He had practiced for about an hour and felt that he had made some progress when he heard some rustling sounds. He opened his eyes and could see in the dark somebody with long hair and a long beard moving around; Zhou Botong was practicing martial arts. He opened his eyes wide and looked closely. He saw Zhou Botong's left hand was doing the seventy-two stance 'Vacant Fist', while his right hand was doing some other Quanzhen Sect fist technique. The fists moved slowly, but they created gusts of wind that had created the rustling sound he heard earlier. Guo Jing admired his amazing skills.

While he was half watching and half lost in thought, he suddenly heard Zhou Botong call out anxiously, "Aiyo!" then hastily brush something from his body. A long black and shiny thing flew from his body and hit a distant tree like he was throwing a hidden projectile of some sort. Guo Jing noticed Zhou Botong shaking and he was startled. Hurriedly going to him he called out, "Big Brother, what happened?"

"I was bitten by a viper! I am dying!" Zhou Botong shouted.

Guo Jing was shocked as he held Zhou Botong's body. His expression had changed; he leaned on Guo Jing's shoulder and slowly walked back to the cave. Guo Jing quickly tore a piece of his clothing and tightly wrapped it around Zhou Botong's thigh to prevent the venom from reaching the heart.

Guo Jing took a piece of flint from his pocket and lit a fire. In the bright firelight he could see more clearly. His heart jumped to his throat. Zhou Botong's calf was swollen very badly.

"This island does not have this kind of venomous green viper. I wonder where it came from?" Zhou Botong said weakly. "The snake wouldn't be able to bite me when I practice normally. But this time I was practicing two sets of fist techniques; I had all my attention on my movements ... Ay!"

Guo Jing heard his trembling voice and knew the poison was severe. If Zhou Botong had not possessed a profound internal energy he would have died earlier. Nervously he bent over and sucked on the wound.

"You can't do that!" Zhou Botong cried out. "The snake's venom is extraordinary. It will kill you."

But Guo Jing was only thinking of saving Zhou Botong's life; he did not even think of his own safety. His right arm held Zhou Botong's body firmly, while his mouth continued sucking. Zhou Botong tried to struggle, but his body was weak and he could not move. A little while later he passed out.

Guo Jing kept sucking the venom out and spat it on the ground. With the poison drained out of his body, plus his profound internal energy Zhou Botong slowly regained consciousness. His eyes were still heavy lidded. Half awake he said, "Brother, your Big Brother is going to return to heaven today. But before leaving this world I gained your friendship, my heart is extremely happy."

Even though Guo Jing had only crossed Zhou Botong's path a short while ago, because they were of the same straightforward and honest nature, they hit it off

immediately. He felt like they had known each other for dozens of years. Right now, as he looked at his dying face, he couldn't prevent tears from flowing down his cheeks.

Zhou Botong smiled sadly and said, "The 'Nine Yin Manual' is hidden inside a box beneath the stone where I usually sit. I was going to give it to you; but since you sucked the deadly snake venom, you will not live long. We two will walk hand in hand to the underworld. No need to fear that we won't have someone to play with. We will play as four people in the clouds ... No, as four ghosts ... that would be interesting. The bigheaded ghost and the grim reaper will be baffled watching us. The ghost world won't be the same." Speaking like this made him quite happy.

Guo Jing heard Zhou Botong say that he too was going to die, but he did not feel anything unusual. He used the fire to examine himself. The fire was about to burn out, so he took Huang Rong's letter and burned it. He then looked around the cave entrance to find a dried branch or grass, but in the hot summer weather the vegetation around him was green and lush.

He was getting more and more anxious. He groped in his pocket to find something that could be used as a torch. But he found nothing, except that leather-like thing wrapped around his dagger that came from Mei Chaofeng. Without giving it a second thought he lit that thing and extended it to examine Zhou Botong's face. He saw his face turning gray, no longer ruddy like a child's.

Zhou Botong saw the flickering fire and showed a faint smile. He saw Guo Jing's countenance had not changed; there was no sign of poison at all. He was confused. He blinked his eyes and looked at the fire. He saw the thing that Guo Jing used as a torch had characters written all over it. He squinted, trying to read what was written; after

reading about ten characters or so he was startled. He recognized that the words were taken from the 'Nine Yin Manual'. He didn't have time to ask any questions so he just raised his hand and struck out the fire, asking, "Brother, what kind of medicine did you take? How come the deadly poison did not affect you?"

Guo Jing guessed it was because he'd drunk the blood of Liang Ziwong's big ginseng-fed snake. So he said, "I once drank a big snake's blood; perhaps that is why I can resist the snake's venom."

Zhou Botong pointed to the leather on the ground, "That is a very precious thing; it absolutely cannot be destroyed ..." he passed out before he could finish his sentence.

At this time Guo Jing did not care about any precious objects; he was busy sealing Zhou Botong's 'Palace Crossing' [gong guo] acupoint, but it did not help. He felt Zhou Botong's calf; it was hot and very swollen.

"Four weaving machines, mandarin ducks fly in pairs ..." he heard Zhou Botong mutter indistinctly.

"What did you say?" Guo Jing asked.

"Too bad that old fellow's head has turned white, too bad ..." Zhou Botong sighed.

Guo Jing knew he was delirious from the poison and he was very anxious. He dashed out of the cave and climbed a tree outside, shouting loudly, "Rong'er! Rong'er! Island Master Huang! Island Master Huang! Help...help!" But Peach Blossom Island encompassed an area of more than ten li across; it was a big island. Huang Yaoshi's residence was located on the other side of the island. Guo Jing's shout was in vain. The only response he heard was his own voice

echoing from the mountain and valley ahead, “ ... Island Master Huang! Help! Help ...!”

Guo Jing jumped down from the tree, at a loss. In that critical moment an idea flashed into his mind, “Snake’s venom cannot harm me; perhaps my blood contains an antidote to the snake’s poison.” Without wasting another second he fumbled about on the ground, looking for the big green bowl that Zhou Botong used to drink tea from everyday. He took his dagger and without hesitation sliced his left arm and let his blood drip into the bowl until the dripping stopped by itself. He made another cut until blood filled the bowl. Then he propped Zhou Botong up on his knee and with his left hand he forced Zhou Botong’s mouth open and with his right hand fed him the blood.

Although he was young and his body strong, losing that much blood had drained his energy. After feeding it all to Zhou Botong he leaned against the cave wall and closed his eyes; he fell asleep not long afterward.

He didn’t know how long he slept, but he felt someone tending his wounds. He opened his eyes and saw Zhou Botong’s white hair and beard. Guo Jing was delighted. “You ... you ... are you well?” he called out.

“I am well, Brother. You have sacrificed yourself to save my life,” Zhou Botong said. “I am sure the grim reaper is greatly disappointed; I am not that easy to kill.”

Guo Jing looked at Zhou Botong’s calf and saw that the dark swelling was no longer there, only a red inflammation that was not life threatening.

That morning the two sat together to meditate, cultivate their inner strength and revitalize their bodies. After lunch Zhou Botong asked Guo Jing the origins of the leather wrap. Guo Jing gathered his thoughts for a moment then



started narrating how his Second Shifu at Cloud Manor had taken some things from Mei Chaofeng; the dagger was amongst those things and the leather was wrapped around it. Later he also noticed the characters, but he did not know what they were so he simply kept it in his pocket without giving it another thought.

Zhou Botong mumbled and was lost in thought for a long time. "Big Brother, you said it was a very precious object, what is it?" Guo Jing asked.

"I have to examine it before I can answer your question. I don't know if it is the real thing; but since it came from Mei Chaofeng, I have strong reasons to believe it is," Zhou Botong replied. Taking the leather he looked at it from top to bottom.

Wang Chongyang won the book, not for his personal gain, but to avoid bloodshed amongst the people of Wulin; therefore, he had strictly forbidden his disciples from ever learning any martial arts from the book. Zhou Botong naturally did not dare to disobey his martial brother's last words. But he recalled what Madame Huang said, 'Simply taking a look without training it can not be considered disobeying.' He'd spent fifteen years in the cave without anything to do, so out of boredom he had read the first volume of the 'Nine Yin Manual' that was in his possession. However, the first volume only contained the methods of cultivating internal energy as well as the basics of swordsmanship; there were no real profound martial arts to defeat an opponent. It was useless if one did not learn the second volume.

Over these past ten years or so, Zhou Botong read the first volume over and over again; he even made some guesses as to what the second volume contained. As soon as he read

the leather wrap, he immediately knew it was related to what he had already memorized.

Zhou Botong raised his eyes to the distant hills and was deep in thought. He loved martial arts; in fact he was obsessed with them. Now he had in his hand the world's greatest and most profound martial arts manual. In all honesty he wanted very much to learn what was in the book; not to build up his own reputation, not to seek vengeance, also not to show off his prowess or to rule the world; he was simply and purely curious to see how profound the martial arts in the book actually were.

He recalled his martial brother's story of Huang Shang compiling the 5481 chapters of the Everlasting Life Taoist Canon [aka The Book of Salvation]; then later on he spent forty years painstakingly studying various exquisite martial arts from various schools. This was no small matter. The 'Twin Killers of the Dark Winds' only got hold of the second volume and they only managed to learn two techniques among the many; yet they were able to wreak havoc in Jianghu. What if they had been able to learn the entire second volume? The result would be inconceivable. But martial brother's last words could not be disobeyed. Zhou Botong pondered these things in his heart; he heaved a heavy sigh, put the leather inside his pocket, closed his eyes and fell asleep.

After having a good rest, he took a tree branch to dig a hole in which he intended to bury both volumes. He was digging and sighing at the same time. Suddenly an idea came to him and he exploded in laughter and cheers, "That's right! That's right! I can have it both ways!" He was so ecstatic that he startled Guo Jing, "Big Brother, what both ways?" But Zhou Botong merely laughed without saying anything. It looked like he'd come up with a really great idea.

“Brother Guo is not my Quanzhen Sect’s disciple. I will teach him and let him train; then I will see the results,” he thought. “That way I can satisfy my curiosity and follow martial brother’s dying wish at the same time.” He was going to tell this idea to Guo Jing when he suddenly had another thought, “From the way he speaks I gather he detests the ‘Nine Yin Manual’. He thinks it is an evil martial art; but that is because the ‘Twin Killers of the Dark Winds’ who only looked at the second volume. They did not learn the first volume. It would have told them how to cultivate their inner energy and build a foundation for the subsequent techniques. They only took the fiercest martial arts they could find and that resulted in the monstrosity of their martial arts. I’d better not tell him anything; I’ll let him practice and let him know afterwards. By that time he will have mastered the books’ martial arts and even if he wanted to get rid of them he won’t be able to do anything about it. Won’t that be interesting?”

By nature he was mischievous; other people would scold him or get mad at him, he did not care. Other people loved him or showed him favor, but he did not give it a thought. As long as he could play or make practical jokes and have fun, he would be happy. Now that he had thought of this idea he maintained his composure and with a straight face he told Guo Jing, “Younger Brother [Xian Di], during my fifteen years inside this cave I have created not only the ‘Vacant Fist’ and the ‘Mutual Hands Combat’ techniques, but also some other ones. Now that we don’t have anything to do, what do you say to me teaching you some more to pass the time away?”

“Nothing could be better,” Guo Jing said, “But Rong’er said she is thinking of a way to get us out of here ...”

“Has she found a way out for us?” Zhou Botong asked.

“Not yet,” Guo Jing replied.

“Then what’s wrong with learning new things while waiting for her?” Zhou Botong suggested.

Guo Jing happily complied, “That will work. Big Brother’s other martial arts must be marvelous.”

Zhou Botong laughed inside, “Don’t you be happy yet,” he thought, “You have fallen for my scheme!” So he immediately passed on the essence of the ‘Nine Yin Manual’ a little at a time from his memory. Naturally Guo Jing did not immediately understand it, but Zhou Botong was very patient. He would repeat the lesson as many times as needed. As for the lessons from the second volume on the leather wrap, he would memorize it first when Guo Jing was not looking, and then he would pass it on as he had memorized it.

The ‘Nine Yin Manual’ contained various martial arts techniques which were different from each other. Zhou Botong taught the theory but did not give any examples on how to do it. He let Guo Jing ponder them and find out on his own. Afterward he would test the newly learned technique against his Quanzhen Sect’s martial arts.

After several days he started to see the marvelous martial arts of the ‘Nine Yin Manual’ which Guo Jing was gradually mastering; however, Guo Jing was still completely unaware that he was learning the ‘Nine Yin Manual’. Zhou Botong was very happy; he would often smile in his sleep.

In the meantime Huang Rong kept preparing food for Guo Jing, although she did not show up personally. Guo Jing’s heart became contented and his skills advanced more quickly.

One day Zhou Botong was teaching the 'Nine Yin Divine Claw' [jiu yin shen zhua]; he instructed Guo Jing to use all of his fingers to practice against the cave's wall. Guo Jing had practiced this several times when he suddenly realized something. "Big Brother," he said, "I think Mei Chaofeng also learned this kind of martial arts, only she practiced against humans. She could insert her five fingers inside someone's skull. It was very cruel."

Zhou Botong was startled, "That's true," he thought, "Mei Chaofeng did not know the first volume's contents so she followed the instructions literally. The second volume only stated 'concentrate the energy in the five fingers and firmly attack the enemy's head.' She did not know that 'the enemy's head' means the enemy's vital points and not literally to insert five fingers into the enemy's skull. It's no wonder she thought she had to train using real skulls. The 'Nine Yin Manual' contains lessons for spiritual purity to chase evil spirits away; how could it teach anyone to practice her type of cruel and ferocious martial arts? That old hag strayed too far from the truth. Brother Guo is already suspicious so I'd better not teach him that kind of martial arts." Thereupon he smiled and said, "Mei Chaofeng practices a demonic type of martial arts; how can she be compared with our true orthodox school of martial arts? All right, we won't train this 'Divine Claw' martial art for the time being; instead, I will teach you more of our Quanzhen heritage martial arts."

While speaking he hatched another good idea, "I will teach him the first volume until he really comprehends everything. Then I will continue with the second volume. He will see the logical connection between the first and the second and he won't be suspicious any longer." So he started to recite the theory from the first volume and told Guo Jing to memorize it.

The lessons in the manual were very deep and profound; how could Guo Jing comprehend everything? Zhou Botong realized Guo Jing was slow, so he told him to recite it aloud. After repeating them dozens of times Guo Jing was able to memorize almost everything. He did not understand the meaning of some of it, but he memorized it anyway. Several days passed and Zhou Botong had passed on most of the book, so he told Guo Jing to start practicing his internal energy cultivation.

Guo Jing felt that the internal energy cultivation method was similar to the one he'd learned from Ma Yu, only this one was deeper and more difficult. He credited that to the fact that Zhou Botong was Ma Yu's martial uncle, so naturally his way of cultivating internal energy would be profounder than Ma Yu's. He also recalled that when Mei Chaofeng sat on his shoulder battling enemies in the Zhao palace she'd asked him some questions about internal energy cultivation which he was able to answer. He did not suspect anything at all. Although he frequently noticed Zhou Botong's funny expression, as though he was amused by something, he thought it was Zhou Botong's natural disposition to play jokes. Maybe he was thinking of other amusing things.

The manual contained more than one thousand gibberish characters without any clear meaning. For the past several years Zhou Botong had repeatedly pondered over those words in the cave, but he still did not have a clue as to what they meant. Nevertheless he passed them on to Guo Jing anyway. When Guo Jing asked what they meant, Zhou Botong simply said, "This secret can't be divulged right now, you will understand it when the time comes."

Memorizing those thousand or so words without understanding what they meant was a hundred times more difficult than memorizing a regular book. It might not be

too difficult for a sharp minded person; but even though Guo Jing was slow, he had strong determination. After more than a thousand times of reciting those words he eventually was able to memorize everything.

Guo Jing woke up early one morning and immediately started practicing his martial arts. When breakfast came he noticed another unusual steamed bun. Without waiting to finish his meal he took the bun into the forest and immediately crushed the wax pill inside to get the letter. Once he had taken a glance he could not help but feel very anxious. The letter said, 'Jing ge ge, Western Poison has proposed to Father to give my hand in marriage to his nephew, and Father answered ...' The letter was not finished, indicating that she was writing it in a hurry. It looked like the word after 'answered' was 'yes'.

Guo Jing's mind was frantic; he waited impatiently for the old servant to clean up then he hastily showed the letter to Zhou Botong.

"Her father gave his consent, that's good. It's none of our business," Zhou Botong said.

"I can't go along with that," Guo Jing said, "Rong'er has promised to be with me. She must be frantic right now."

"If you take a wife, there are some martial arts you cannot practice. That will be too bad," Zhou Botong said. "I ... I feel deep remorse that I didn't listen to good advice. Good Brother, listen to my advice: you'd better not to take a wife."

Guo Jing felt the more Zhou Botong spoke, the more unreasonable he became; that made Guo Jing more concerned than ever. Zhou Botong continued, "If I hadn't lost my virginity and therefore could not practice my martial brother's fiercest martial arts, how could Old

Heretic Huang have imprisoned me in this confounded hole? You see, if your thoughts are focused on your wife, your heart is divided. I am sure today's martial arts practice will not get you anywhere. If you really marry Old Heretic Huang's girl... ay! That will be too bad! If only I ... ay! Never mind that. In short, if you let yourself get entangled in an affair with a woman, you won't reach the pinnacle of perfection. Moreover, you will offend your friend and disobey your martial brother. It is very difficult for you to forget her. I wonder how she is ... Anyway, don't ever look at her pretty face, don't ever caress her beautiful body and don't teach her acupoints sealing techniques, because she will feel your body to find those acupoints. Those are great taboos ... worse yet, don't ever ask her to marry you ... "

To Guo Jing Zhou Botong was just mumbling illogically, but it was troublesome. "Whether I marry her or not, we'll sort that out later," he said, "Big Brother, we have to help her now."

Zhou Botong laughed, "Western Poison is very evil; his nephew cannot be different. Old Heretic Huang's daughter is pretty, but she must have the same character as Old Heretic Huang: a perverted mind. Let Western Poison's nephew take her as his wife; let them both suffer and let their martial arts not go anywhere. That way we kill two birds with one stone. No, more precisely...lose two birds with one stone. There's nothing good in either one of them. Don't you think this is a good idea?"

Guo Jing sighed, walked into the woods, and sat on the ground. His mind was jumbled, "Even if I have to die on Peach Blossom Island's pathways, I must find her," he thought. Once his mind was set he leaped up and started moving. At that moment he heard two loud calls from the sky and two white forms swooped down towards him. They were the white eagles Tolui brought him from the steppes.



Guo Jing was delighted and extended his arm to let the eagles perch. Only then did he see a bamboo tube tied to the male eagle's leg. Hastily he loosened it and found a letter inside. It was from Huang Rong. She told him the latest developments - how Western Poison would arrive in a few days to arrange the betrothal; how her father was closely guarding her and not letting her out of her quarter's even half a step. That included preparing food for Guo Jing. In the end she said that if she could not get away from all of this, she would commit suicide to show her love for him. She also told Guo Jing that the pathways on the island were dangerous and mysterious and full of booby traps, so she warned Guo Jing not to try to find her.

Guo Jing was dumbstruck. He pulled out his dagger and carved these six characters on the bamboo tube, 'live together, die together' [yi qi huo, yi qi si]; then he tied the tube back on the eagle's leg and raised his arm and pointed north. The eagles circled him several times, and then they flew north. Once he'd made this decision his heart was calm. He walked back to Zhou Botong, sat on the ground in front of him and listened to him imparted more lessons on martial arts.

The next ten days passed without any word from Huang Rong. Guo Jing had managed to memorize the first volume in its entirety. Zhou Botong was inwardly delighted; he proceeded to recite the second volume for Guo Jing to memorize. Again, he did not give any examples or instruction on how to practice them for fear that Guo Jing would see through his scheme. Guo Jing diligently studied and committed each and every word to his memory. Several hundred times worth of reciting later he had both the first and second volumes down pat in his mind, including all the gibberish words such as 'ang li na de' and 'ha hu wen bo ying' [translator's note: these characters don't make logical

sentences, so I leave them as they are]. He did not miss a single word.

Listening to Guo Jing Zhou Botong's heart was filled with admiration. "This dumb kid can actually memorize the entire dumb martial arts manual. Old Urchin salutes him."

That night the sky was clear and the sea was calm reflecting the bright silver moon shining over the island. Zhou Botong just finished checking Guo Jing's progress. He discovered that Guo Jing had made tremendous advancements in his martial arts without even realizing it. He was very happy and believed that the manual really did contain profound martial arts techniques. He thought that if he were to learn the techniques from books, he would eventually surpass Huang Yaoshi and Hong Qigong.

The two were sitting on the ground, idly chatting when they suddenly heard rustling noises coming from the distance. Zhou Botong jumped up in alarm, "Snakes!" he cried. He'd just closed his mouth when hissing sounds reached their ears. It sounded like there was a swarm of snakes coming their way. Zhou Botong's face turned pale and he dashed into the cave. He was a courageous man and his martial arts might be superb, but not when facing snakes. Guo Jing immediately moved some big rocks and covered the cave entrance.

"Big Brother," he said, "I'll go take a look. Don't come out."

"Be careful and return quickly," Zhou Botong answered. "But I'd say you don't need to take a look. What's so interesting about vipers? How ... how can there be so many snakes on this island? I have lived here for fifteen years and haven't seen a single snake. Look how bad this island has become! Old Heretic Huang always boasts of his vast knowledge and resourcefulness but look how dirty this

Peach Blossom Island has become. Sea turtles, vipers, centipedes and all kinds of creepy-crawlies are coming here.”

## Chapter 18 - The Three Tests

Translated by Frans Soetomo



*Huang Yaoshi kept blowing the flute; Guo Jing raised his hand and struck the bamboo stick*

*between two beats of the music. He struck again, still between the two music beats. He had struck his bamboo stick four times, all in the wrong places.*

Guo Jing went towards where the snake noises were coming from. After dozens of steps in the bright moonlight he saw millions of green snakes slithering together as a mass. With them were more than ten men wearing white clothing and carrying long poles herding the snakes.

Guo Jing gulped; he was greatly surprised, "What are those people with so many snakes doing here? Could it be that Western Poison has arrived?" Without regard to his own safety he came closer, snuck behind trees and followed them north. Luckily the men who herded the snakes did not have a high level of martial arts, otherwise he would be detected.

A deaf and mute servant of Huang Yaoshi could be seen in front of the mass, showing the way. They walked on the winding path for several li through the forest and crossed a small hill before finally arriving at a large stretch of grass meadow. To the north of the meadow was a bamboo forest. As soon as they were all on the meadow, the men in white blew their whistles and the snakes stopped with their heads raised high in the air.

Guo Jing knew there must be something in the bamboo grove and he wanted to take a look, but he did not dare to reveal his presence by walking across the meadow. So he stealthily walked to the east and then circled back north, keeping his ears open at all times; but the forest was quiet. He finally arrived and immediately entered the thick green bamboo grove.

Inside the grove there was a small pavilion built from bamboo. Under the bright moonlight Guo Jing could see,

written across the pavilion opening, these three characters, 'Old Jade-Green Pavilion' [ji cui ting]. On either side hung two couplets: 'under the shadow of peach blossom the divine sword flew' [tao hua ying li fei shen jian] and 'with the jade-colored ocean tide the jade flute arose' [bi hai chao sheng an yu xiao].

Several bamboo chairs were placed inside the pavilion; the chairs looked rustic and old. In the bright moonlight the bamboo looked no longer green but smooth and shiny yellow. The pavilion was built between two big pine trees. Their trunks and branches spread out looking like dragons lurking in the dark. The trees were several hundred years old. The dark green bamboo surrounding the bamboo pavilion and the trees gave a feeling of serenity and beauty.

Guo Jing looked back and saw that the snakes had arranged themselves in row after row, on the meadow. Only now did he realize that the snakes were not only green but other types of snakes as well: there were rattlesnakes, golden-scaled snakes, black snakes and other kinds of venomous snakes. The snakes kept moving their heads, which made the meadow appear to ripple like ocean waves. The snakes' tongues flicked in and out of their mouths, looking like tiny dancing chaotic flames.

The snakes' herders divided the mass to open up a pathway through the middle. Dozens of females dressed in white walked through carrying red lanterns. Several zhang [1 zhang is approximately 10 feet/3 meters] behind them two men walked slowly. The first was wearing a long white satin gown, embroidered with gold thread and held a folding fan in his hand. It was none other than Ouyang Ke.

Arriving at the bamboo grove he said in a loud and clear voice, "Mr. Ouyang from the Western Region pays a visit to the Peach Blossom Island Master Huang."

"It really is Western Poison," Guo Jing thought, "No wonder all this pomp and fanfare." He turned his eyes to the man beside Ouyang Ke. He was big and tall and also wore white clothing, but because the light was coming from behind him, Guo Jing could not see his face clearly.

Those two people stood there waiting. Out from the bamboo grove came two people. Guo Jing's heart leaped to his throat and he almost called out in alarm; it was none other than Huang Yaoshi holding Huang Rong's hand coming to welcome the guests.

Ouyang Feng rushed forward and raised his hands in salute. Huang Yaoshi reciprocated by cupping his fists. Ouyang Ke actually knelt down where he was, kowtowed four times and said, "Son-in-law kowtows to the Honorable Father-in-law and wishes Honorable Father-in-law peace and prosperity."

"Enough!" Huang Yaoshi said, extending his hand to raise him up. Guo Jing could hear clearly what these two people were saying; his heart was in a tumult and he didn't know what to do.

Ouyang Ke anticipated that Huang Yaoshi would certainly test his martial arts, so he was prepared; even when kowtowing he was fully alert. Suddenly he felt his own right hand moving toward his left hand and pushing it upward. He stumbled and almost fell face down on the ground; only by exerting his internal energy was he finally able to stay standing, but he still staggered. "Aiyo!" he called out. Ouyang Feng immediately stretched the staff in his hand and tapped gently on his nephew's back. Ouyang Ke took advantage of this force and steadied himself.

Ouyang Feng smiled. "Good!" he said, "Brother Yao [Yao Xiong] (translator's note: different character, more

respectful than Huang Rong's 'Jing ge ge' 'Brother Jing'), was that your way of greeting your son-in-law at your first meeting ....by making him do a somersault?"

Huang Yaoshi sneered. "Once he helped others bully my blind disciple; another time he frightened her with his snakes. I wanted to see what abilities he possesses."

Ouyang Feng laughed. "That was a small childish misunderstanding, Brother Yao, please don't mind him. This child of mine, is he worthy enough to be your precious daughter's match?" He turned toward Huang Rong to check her out; clucking his tongue in admiration, he continued, "Elder Brother Huang [lao ge], with this beautiful young lady, your life lacks nothing."

He groped in his pocket and produced a small embroidered box. He opened the box revealing a pigeon-egg sized sphere. The sphere shone brightly in the dark and was dazzling to the eyes. He turned to Huang Rong and smiled, "This is the 'Rhinoceros Dragon Pill, made from the Western Region's rarest animal. I further refined it with some other medicinal substances. When you wear it, you won't be affected by hundreds of types of poison. It is one-of-a-kind in the whole wide world. Later on when you become my nephew's wife, you need not fear your uncle's venomous snakes and insects. This 'Dragon' pill's usefulness is not negligible, but it cannot be regarded as the most precious treasure in the world. Your father has traversed the world; what kind of treasures he has not seen? This is only a countryman-from-a-remote-area's gift of first meeting. I am afraid he would laugh at it." Then he presented the box to Huang Rong.

Ouyang Feng was an expert at using poison; by giving this precious poison repellent as a dowry he showed his sincerity and was hoping to win Huang Yaoshi's heart.



Guo Jing saw everything. "Rong'er has always been good to me; she won't change her mind. Surely she doesn't want that first meeting gift of yours," he thought. But unexpectedly he heard Huang Rong say with a smile, "Many thanks to you!" and extended her hand to receive it.

As soon as Ouyang Ke saw Huang Rong's snow-white skin and face as pretty as a flower his soul had already been bought; now that she was smiling at him, his whole body melted as he thought, "Since her father has given her hand in marriage to me, her attitude towards me is naturally not the same as it was before." He felt smug. But suddenly something metal flashed towards him. "Not good!" he cried, and immediately bent his body backwards using the 'Iron Bridge' [tie ban chiao] stance.

"What are you doing?" Huang Yaoshi scolded. His left sleeve flicked and struck down most of the steel needles shot from Huang Rong's hand, while with the back of his right hand he pushed her shoulder back.

"Wah!" Huang Rong bawled. "Father, you'd better kill me," she cried. "I'd rather die than marry this bad thing."

Ouyang Feng thrust the 'Dragon' pill into Huang Rong's hand while his other hand gently fended off Huang Yaoshi's palm. "Your daughter is just testing my nephew's martial arts, why are you so serious?" Because he was striking his own daughter, Huang Yaoshi's palm naturally did not carry a lot of strength. Ouyang Feng's hand also did not carry a lot of force.

As Ouyang Ke straightened his body, he felt pain in his left chest; he knew he'd been hit by one or two needles. However, he was proud and did not want anyone else to know, so he kept a straight face. But he was embarrassed. "She does not want to marry me after all," he thought.

Ouyang Feng smiled, "Brother Yao, since our last meeting at Mount Hua, we haven't seen each other for more than twenty years. Now that you have accepted my nephew's proposal, should you have some business to complete, your brother will not dare to refuse his assistance."

"Who dares to provoke you, Old Poison?" Huang Yaoshi replied. "You have stayed in the Western Region for twenty years, what fierce new martial arts have you mastered? Come, let me see."

As soon as Huang Rong heard her father mention 'new martial arts' her interest was piqued. She wiped her tears away and leaned on her father. Her eyes looked closely at Ouyang Feng. She saw a curved black staff in his hand and looked like it was made of steel. The head of the staff resembled a man's face with its mouth open showing two rows of sharp teeth. The face looked ugly and fearsome. What was more amazing was that there were a couple of silver-scaled snakes slithering up and down the staff.

Ouyang Feng smiled. "I was inferior to you then, and now that I have wasted more than twenty years, I certainly still won't be your match," he said. "We've become in-laws now. I am thinking of staying on Peach Blossom Island for a few days and asking your advice."

When Ouyang Feng sent an envoy to propose marriage for his nephew, Huang Yaoshi thought that Ouyang Feng was one of only a handful of people whose martial arts could be compared to his own. Since Ouyang Feng was an educated man, so his nephew must be as well. He knew his daughter was stubborn and strong-willed. If she married just anybody, he was afraid she would bully her husband. Besides, he loathed that Guo kid whom his daughter liked. Ouyang Ke was not only highly educated, but was highly skilled in martial arts as well; not too many young men

would hold a candle to him. That was the reason he accepted their proposal. But now as he listened to Ouyang Feng's sweet mouth, he could not help but feel suspicious. He knew Ouyang Feng was crafty and sly and Ouyang Feng would not easily admit defeat to others in term of martial arts. His Toad Stance had been neutralized by Wang Chongyang's Solitary Yang Finger; could it be that he had recovered it completely? Huang Yaoshi took out his jade flute and said, "Honored guests who come from afar, Little Brother is going to play a tune to entertain you. Please sit down and listen to this song."

Ouyang Feng knew Huang Yaoshi was going to play the 'Jade-Colored Tidal Wave song' to test his internal strength, so he showed a faint smile and waved his left hand. The thirty-two white-dressed lantern-carrier maidens immediately stepped forward and kneeled before them. Ouyang Feng smiled and said, "Your brother has acquired these thirty-two maidens from various regions in the west. Please accept them as my gift to an old friend. They are trained in singing and dancing even though they come from uncultured places; of course they can't be compared to Jiangnan's beautiful maidens."

"Your Brother does not enjoy this kind of gift very much," Huang Yaoshi replied, "Since my wife passed away, I regard the world's beautiful women as dung. I do not dare to accept Brother Feng's generous gift."

"What's the harm in some entertainment to pass the time?" Ouyang Feng laughed.

Huang Rong noticed that these women's skin was fair and light in color. They were tall in stature and some had blond hair and blue eyes; their noses were high and their eyes deep so they were totally different from the women of the

Central Plains. But they were beautiful and had a seductive look that would attract casual onlookers.

Ouyang Feng clapped his hands three times and eight women brought out various musical instruments. They started playing while the other twenty-four women started dancing to the tune. The musical instruments as well as the tune were different from the ones commonly played in the Central Plains and they sounded weird to Huang Rong's ears. She watched the front row women bend down, turn to the left and then back to the right; their bodies were very supple. The next row did the same as row after row danced in succession, resembling a large snake. After a while each woman spread both hands apart; from the tip of their left hand to the tip of their right hand, their bodies swayed following the tune reminding her of snakes slithering on the ground.

Huang Rong remembered Ouyang Ke's 'Spirit Snake Fist', so she cast a glance towards him only to see that Ouyang Ke was staring intently at her. She hated him deeply and wished that her father had not intercepted her needles. She would find another way of taking his life and even if her father should force her to marry, that person was already dead. It was called the 'Remove the Firewood from Under the Pot' tactic. Having had this thought she was happy and a smile broke out on her face. Ouyang Ke saw her sudden smile and thought that she was smiling at him. He was so elated that he momentarily forgot the pain in his chest.

By now the dance movements of the women were getting more intense. Their bodies moved erotically as their hands caressed their own buttocks, then moved upwards to their breasts; then they unfastened their dresses so they showed their upper bodies and posed in various postures.

The men who herded the snakes had closed their eyes tightly; they did not dare to look. Even then their minds were disturbed.

Huang Yaoshi simply smiled, put the flute to his lips, and he started playing a tune. The women's bodies suddenly shook and their dance movements became chaotic. A few bars later both their music and their dance were following the flute's sound.

Ouyang Feng knew something was amiss; he clapped his hands and a maiden stepped forward carrying an iron zither [zheng]. Ouyang Ke began to feel his heart beating faster. The eight women playing the musical instruments had lost their self-control and followed the flute's tune. The men in charge of the snakes jumped up and down like crazy men amongst the snakes.

Ouyang Feng played a few notes on his zither producing metallic sounds like an iron horse charging toward the enemy; the complete opposite to the soft murmuring sound of the flute. Huang Yaoshi smiled and said, "Come, come! Let us play a duet." As soon as the flute left his lips, everyone was released from their hysterical condition.

"Everybody block your ears! Island Master Huang and I will play some music," Ouyang Feng shouted. The people who came with him knew the song would not be an ordinary one; they immediately grabbed anything, including pieces of their own clothing that could be used to cover their ears. They put layer after layer of cotton and pieces of clothing over their ears; yet they still feared the sound would penetrate that barrier. Ouyang Ke also took out some cotton balls to plug his ears.

"My father plays his flute for your listening enjoyment; this is a big honor for you, yet all of you cover your ears. That is

so rude! You come to Peach Blossom Island as guests, yet you dare to insult the host!" Huang Rong mocked.

"Don't be rude!" Huang Yaoshi scolded her. "The ones who do not dare to listen to my flute actually have more sense. They have learned their lesson ... ha ... ha ... Your uncle's iron zither skill is considered the best in the world, yet you dare to listen to him? Do you want to test yourself?" Then he took a silk handkerchief from his pocket, tore it in halves and told Huang Rong to cover up her ears with them.

Guo Jing was curious about the world's best iron zither; he wanted to hear Ouyang Feng's fierce method, so he came a few steps closer.

Huang Yaoshi turned to Ouyang Feng, "Your snakes cannot cover their ears." Then he turned his head towards his deaf and mute servant. He made some gestures and the servant nodded his head. The servant then signaled the snakes' herders to leave by waving his hand. These men had been waiting for an opportunity to get away from that place; as soon as Ouyang Feng nodded his head in approval, they hurriedly drove the snakes away with the deaf and mute servant leading the way.

Ouyang Feng said, "Your Brother's martial arts are not good enough. I must ask Brother Yao to reduce your strength by thirty percent." He sat cross-legged on a big rock with the zither on his lap and immediately used his right fingers to pluck some strings.

The original 'qin zheng' [a zither from the short-lived Qin dynasty 221-207 BC] produced a sad and shrill tone. This Western Region iron zither produced an even more intensely sorrowful sound. Guo Jing did not understand music, but the zither's tune affected his feelings. The louder the zither's sound, the harder his heart beat. The quicker

the zither's tune, the faster his breathing became. His heart was thumping very hard, almost jumping out of his throat. It was an intensely uneasy feeling. After listening a while longer he felt his heart beat intensify and he had to struggle hard to stay conscious. "If this zither keeps getting stronger and stronger, how can I not be killed by its music?" he thought. He immediately retreated a few steps and circulated his 'chi' according to the Quanzhen method. After a while he managed to calm his heart and the zither's music no longer adversely affected him very much.

The zither's music was getting more intense and in Guo Jing's mind it resembled the metallic clamor of armored cavalry charging at full speed. The thin tune of the jade flute seemed to ride smoothly in the midst of the clamoring zither's tune. Guo Jing was trembling; his face was red from heat and he was sweating profusely. Again he quickly circulated his internal energy trying to further calm himself.

Although the zither was loud, it was not able to drown out the flute. Two distinct tunes intermingled, creating an eerie melody. The iron zither screamed like an ape from the Wuxia Gorge [one of the Three Gorges of the Yangtze River] or a ghost's cry in the dead of the night, while the flute sang like a Phoenix from the Kunlun Mountains or the soft murmur of a woman inside her chamber. One resembled the heartrending cry of a mournful soul, while the other carried the feeling of someone leisurely wandering through the wilderness. One high, the other low; one rushing forward, the other leisurely retreating; neither overpowered the other.

Initially Huang Rong watched as these two played music with smile on her face; but later she saw their expressions were getting serious. Her father stood up and started to walk around while playing his flute. His steps were actually following the 'Eight Trigrams' [ba gua]. She knew this was

the footwork her father followed when he was cultivating his internal energy; it showed her how fierce the battle was for her father as he was forced to use all his strength. Turning toward Ouyang Feng she did not see anything better. Thick steam was coming from the top of his head as his sleeves fluttered following movements of his hands as he plucked the strings. Gusts of wind blew everywhere. His face looked totally focused on his zither playing; obviously he did not dare to be careless.

In the bamboo groove Guo Jing listened to the music attentively. He was pondering in his heart what these two instruments – the iron zither and the jade flute – had to do with martial arts? They sounded so evil to him; how could the sounds affect other people's hearts and minds? At first he was too busy circulating his 'chi' and calming his heart and mind, but gradually he was able to control himself and follow the flow of flute and zither sounds. A little while later he began to realize that those two sounds were actually battling each other. When one sound was on the offensive, the other took a defensive position. Sometimes one attacked the other furiously, while the other blocked the attack while waiting for a good opportunity to counterattack. It really was no different than a battle between two martial arts masters. After pondering some more it suddenly dawned on him, "That's right! Island Master Huang is having an internal energy match with Ouyang Feng." Because he wanted to understand better, he closed his eyes and gave his ears full attention.

He began to hear the two sounds were alternately gaining victory or suffering defeat. Being musically illiterate the sound of the music could not affect his spirits; but he did feel openness in his heart as though he was looking at something bright. His mind wandered back to when Zhou Botong taught him the seventy-two stance 'Vacant Fist'



whose origins stemmed from the words 'empty/vacant/open' and 'clear/bright'. With his mind fully receptive and uncluttered, he could clearly 'see' every detail of the internal energy fight between Huang Yaoshi and Ouyang Feng. True, his internal energy was still inferior to those two experts, but he had improved greatly without even realizing it. Besides, as a spectator, he could see better than those two who were involved in the battle. He'd often wondered why Zhou Botong could not resist the flute's sound while with inferior internal strength he could. He did not know that Zhou Botong carried heavy guilt in his heart because of what he had done in the past. Therefore it was not purely due to one's internal energy strength that one could withstand the flute's sound.

Now Guo Jing heard Ouyang Feng's zither crushing Huang Yaoshi's flute with a force as powerful as a thunderbolt. The flute evaded to the east and dodged to the west and as soon as there was a gap in the zither's tune the flute would counterattack immediately. After a while the zither gradually slowed down, while the flute got more intense. Suddenly Guo Jing remembered the theory behind the 'Vacant Fist' which he'd memorized. It said, 'hard must not last long and soft must not defend long'. He thought, "In not too long the zither will launch a counterattack." Sure enough, when the flute slowed a little bit, an abrupt clank was heard as the iron zither again assumed the offensive.

Guo Jing had memorized the theory well, but his perception of it was still low. Zhou Botong did not explain the meaning of the words he passed on to Guo Jing so his overall comprehension was perhaps only about ten percent. Now, as he listened to the music battle between Huang Yaoshi and Ouyang Feng, he began to understand who was doing what. It followed the theory he had memorized so well. Inwardly he was delighted. The 'Nine Yin Manual' contained

some very advanced martial arts theories. If it were left to him to dissect the theory, even with someone's assistance, he would probably spend more than a year trying to understand what it said. But as he listened to the two tunes colliding he kept comparing the battle to the theory. However, he saw some discrepancies between the theory and a real battle situation and he attributed those discrepancies to his own shallow comprehension. For example, there were several occasions where Huang Yaoshi was obviously gaining the upper hand as long as he kept the flute's tune constant. Then, Ouyang Feng was not able to withstand it. But Ouyang Feng also missed several opportunities to exploit to his advantage. Guo Jing had initially thought they were being modest and had backed off; but as he listened more, that didn't appear to be the case.

His intelligence might not be high, but after those two people repeatedly made similar mistakes he began to realize that the flute and zither had a lot of holes in their defenses. After listening for a little bit more a thought came into his mind, "Compared to the theory of the 'Vacant Fist', their offense and defense have flaws and deficiencies; could it be that the theory passed on by Brother Zhou is better than both Island Master Huang's and Western Poison's martial arts?" But then he changed his mind, "Nah! It couldn't be! If Brother Zhou's martial arts are really better than Island Master Huang's, how could those two fight countless battles over fifteen years and he still be stranded inside that cave?"

He racked his brain for a long time without coming to any conclusions; then he heard the flute tune climbing higher and higher until, if it went still higher, Ouyang Feng's defeat would be decided. But the flute was not able to climb any higher; it had reached its peak. Guo Jing stifled a laugh, "I

was really dumb! There is a limit to what one can achieve. Among the desires of the heart, nine out of ten cannot be achieved. I know that if my fist could generate a ten thousand catty force [5000kg / 11,000+lb], I will be able to crush my opponent to dust; but how can my fist develop that ten thousand catty force? Seventh Master often said, 'Looking at others easily carrying a burden on a pole does not mean we can do the same without breaking our back.' If merely carrying a burden follows this principle, how much more so do martial arts?"

The sounds of music became increasingly fierce and it sounded like those two were engaged in hand-to-hand combat, or fighting at very close quarters with naked blades. Victory or defeat would be decided very soon. Guo Jing was worried for Huang Yaoshi when he suddenly heard a long and loud whistle coming from the direction of the sea.

Both Huang Yaoshi and Ouyang Feng were startled and the flute and the zither slowed down. The whistle came nearer and nearer. It sounded like someone was on a boat coming towards the island. Ouyang Feng moved his hand and stroked two metallic notes, 'clank, clank.' The distant whistle went higher to overpower the zither. Not too long afterwards Huang Yaoshi's flute joined in. Sometimes the flute was fighting the long whistle and sometimes it tangled with the zither in a close fight. The three distinct sounds were fighting each other.

Guo Jing had played 'four-people combat' with Zhou Botong, so he did not have any problems dividing his mind to distinguish between the different sounds. He knew a senior with a very high level of martial arts had arrived.

Soon the person uttering the long whistle had arrived at the forest. The whistle rose high then low. It sometimes

sounded like a dragon's cry or a lion's roar and sometimes resembled a wolf's howl or an owl's cry. Then it sounded like a strong wind blowing through the forest which suddenly turned into a gentle rain showering the flowers. It was constantly changing.

The flute sound was clear and bright, the zither sound was intensely mournful, yet the combination of the three made a mysteriously wonderful sound which did not sound too bad at all. The three different sounds engaged each other in a close fight.

Guo Jing was amazed and could not help exclaiming, "Wonderful!" But once he closed his mouth he realized he had made a big mistake. He scurried away, but it was too late! A green shadow flashed by and Huang Yaoshi was standing in front of him. The three sounds were no longer heard. Huang Yaoshi lowered his head and said, "Good Boy, come with me."

Guo Jing did not have a choice and meekly greeted, "Island Master Huang." With the hair on the back of his neck raised he followed Huang Yaoshi back towards the bamboo pavilion.

Huang Rong still had her ears covered with silk, so she did not hear Guo Jing's exclamation. Now Guo Jing suddenly appeared and she was pleasantly surprised. "Jing ge ge! You have finally come ..." she called out. She was joyful, yet sad at the same time; before she could finish speaking tears were already rolling down her cheeks. She rushed forward and threw herself onto Guo Jing's chest. Guo Jing opened his arms and embraced her tightly.

Now that Guo Jing had appeared, Ouyang Ke was annoyed; then as he saw how intimate Huang Rong was with Guo Jing and his heart burned hot with hatred. With a gust of wind

his fist flew toward Guo Jing's face. "Stinky kid ... you are here too!" he shouted.

He thought his martial arts skill was higher than Guo Jing's and furthermore, his attack could be considered a sneak attack and Guo Jing was unprepared. Lashing out in hatred, he thought he might break Guo Jing's nose. Not in his wildest imagination could he know that the Guo Jing now was not the same Guo Jing as when they fought each other at the Baoying Ancestral Hall. Guo Jing saw a fist coming and he leaned to the side to evade; then his left hand launched the 'Swan Gradually Lands' [hong jian yu liu] while his right hand launched the 'Proud Dragon Shows Remorse'; both from the 'Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms'.

The 'Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms' were unparalleled in the world; one move was very difficult to withstand, much less two stances at the same time. How could Ouyang Ke face them? Huang Yaoshi and Ouyang Feng were actually standing close-by, but they did not anticipate Guo Jing's counterattack. Both were startled and were unable to do anything.

Ouyang Ke saw his opponent's left hand threatening his right side. He knew the 'Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms' were very fierce and he could evade but could not parry. Quickly he leaned his body to the left at exactly the same time as Guo Jing's right hand's 'Proud Dragon Shows Remorse' came in. 'Crack!' his upper torso was squarely hit and one of his ribs was broken.

He was aware of the fierceness of his opponent's attack, so when Guo Jing's hand arrived he had already focused his internal energy into his chest to protect his heart and lungs against the incoming force. Furthermore, as soon as he was hit he tried to lessen the injury by trying to jump up. The

incredible force from Guo Jing's hand had added to his own energy and sent him flying towards the bamboo pavilion's roof. He managed to land standing, albeit staggering badly; then slowly slid down. He was terribly embarrassed and his chest hurt badly. He walked back slowly.

Guo Jing's counterattack had surprised both the Eastern Heretic and the Western Poison and taught Ouyang Ke a lesson he wouldn't easily forget. It also received Huang Rong's accolades. She clapped her hands and bounced up and down with great happiness. Guo Jing himself did not realize that his martial arts had improved tremendously. He simply thought that Ouyang Ke was being careless and was caught off guard. He was afraid Ouyang Ke would launch a counterattack, so he withdrew two steps and waited for his opponent with rapt attention.

Ouyang Feng glared angrily at Guo Jing as he called out loudly, "Old Beggar Hong ... congratulations on your fine disciple!"

Huang Rong had removed the silk handkerchief from her ears and upon hearing Ouyang Feng's loud call she knew Hong Qigong had arrived. Truly a savior sent from heaven. She rushed outside the bamboo grove and loudly called, "Shifu! Shifu! [Master]"

Huang Yaoshi was astounded, "Why did Rong'er call the Old Beggar Hong 'Shifu'?" Right at that moment Hong Qigong appeared with a scarlet wine gourd on his back, a bamboo staff in his right hand, Huang Rong's hand in his left and smiling broadly as he entered the bamboo grove.

Huang Yaoshi and Hong Qigong greeted each other and exchanged some pleasantries. Then Huang Yaoshi turned to his daughter and asked, "Rong'er, what did you call Qigong?"

"Senior Qigong has taken me as his disciple," Huang Rong replied.

Huang Yaoshi was delighted. He turned to Hong Qigong saying, "So Brother Qi [Qi Xiong] has accepted my daughter; your brother appreciates that very much. But my daughter is mischievous; I do hope Brother Qi will teach her some lessons." Speaking thus he raised his hands in respect.

Hong Qigong smiled. "Brother Yao's martial arts are both broad and profound. This girl won't be able to learn them all in her lifetime; why would I need to meddle? But since you asked, the reason I took her as my disciple was so that I can eat for free. She prepared a lot of good food for me, so you don't need to thank me," he said. Huang Yaoshi and Hong Qigong both laughed heartily.

Huang Rong pointed her finger at Ouyang Ke and said, "Father, this bad man bullied me. If not for Senior Qigong looking after me on your behalf, you wouldn't have seen Rong'er so soon."

"Nonsense!" Huang Yaoshi reprimanded her, "How could he bully you for no reason?"

"If you don't believe me, ask him!" Huang Rong replied. Turning her head towards Ouyang Ke she said, "You have to swear an oath that if you answer my father's question with even half-a-lie there will come a day when the vipers on your uncle's staff will bite you."

Listening to her words Ouyang Feng and Ouyang Ke's faces changed. Ouyang Feng had spent more than ten years raising the vipers on his staff. They were a mixed-breed of various venomous snakes so their poison was extremely lethal. Ouyang Feng used to punish his rebellious disciples or his enemies with a bite from these snakes. Once the

poison entered somebody's system, the victim would suffer a terrible itch all over, followed by a violent painful death. Ouyang Feng did have the antidote; but after the poison entered one's body, even if the antidote saved one's life, one would lose all his martial arts and would live forever as a cripple. Huang Rong of course did not know this; she simply felt that the snakes entwined on Ouyang Feng's staff were peculiar so she capriciously mentioned them. Who would have thought that she had touched exactly on the main taboo subject of the Western Poison family?

"I dare not answer Honorable Father-in-law's questions untruthfully," Ouyang Ke promised.

"You are speaking nonsense again!" Huang Rong spat. "You make me want to slap your ears really hard. Let me ask you this: Did you or did you not see me in Beijing at the Zhao Palace?"

Ouyang Ke had a broken rib and his chest had been hit by her steel needle, so the pain was nearly unbearable; but he was too proud to show his weakness in front of others. He gritted his teeth and was able to speak, but the pain was getting worse and resulted in a cold sweat showing on his forehead. Even though he wanted to answer Huang Rong, he did not dare to open his mouth. All he could do was nod in the affirmative.

"At that time you, along with Sha Tongtian, Peng Lianhu, Liang Ziweng, and Monk Lingzhi, surrounded and bullied me, did you not?" Huang Rong asked again.

Ouyang Ke wanted to defend himself by explaining that he was not a collaborator with those people to bully her; but all he could say was, "I ... I did not collaborate with them ...". His chest was in so much pain that he could not say another word.



“Very well,” Huang Rong said, “I don’t need your answer; all you need to do is nod or shake your head in reply to my questions. Let me ask you this: Sha Tongtian, Peng Lianhu, Liang Ziwen, and Monk Lingzhi meant to harm me, did they not?” Ouyang Ke nodded.

“They wanted to capture me, but failed miserably. Then you showed up and went into action, did you not?” Huang Rong asked again. Ouyang Ke had no choice but to nod his head again.

“At that time I was alone inside the Zhao Palace; I had nobody to help me and my situation was precarious. My father did not know my whereabouts, so even had he wanted to rescue me, he would not have been able to. Isn’t that right?” Huang Rong continued. Ouyang Ke knew she was trying to win sympathy from her father and incite her father’s hatred toward him, but what she said was a fact, so he had no choice but to nod his head again.

Huang Rong reached out for her father’s hand and said, “Father, you don’t love Rong’er anymore. If Mother was still alive you wouldn’t treat me like this ...” Huang Yaoshi heard her mention his beloved wife and he felt a stab of pain in his heart. He reached out his left arm and hugged her.

Ouyang Feng was smart and he felt something was not right; before Huang Rong could ask another question he interrupted her. “Miss Huang,” he asked, “Those well-known martial arts characters wanted to capture you; but since you have mastered your family’s peerless skills in wushu [kung fu] they could not overcome you, could they?” Huang Rong nodded her head and smiled sweetly. Huang Yaoshi listened to Ouyang Feng praising his family’s martial arts and showed a faint smile.

Turning to Huang Yaoshi, Ouyang Feng said, "Brother Yao, ever since my nephew first saw your daughter his heart was captivated by her beauty and excellent skills. He sent a pigeon to summon me and I came from the White Camel Mountain, thousands of li away, crossed the Central Plains and the sea to Peach Blossom Island to ask for your daughter's hand in marriage. You have considered my haste and, although unworthy, have received me well. Other than Brother Yao, there is no one in this present age that would do such thing."

"I do not dare to accept such compliments," Huang Yaoshi smiled. He thought that even with his high position, Ouyang Feng was still willing to travel a long way to see him and he felt honored.

Ouyang Feng then turned to Hong Qigong and said, "Brother Qi, we uncle and nephew admire Peach Blossom Island's martial arts; but you...how could you belittle us by bullying the juniors? If my nephew had been unfortunate, he could have died from your unique skill of the 'Steel Needle Rain'."

Actually, it was Hong Qigong who saved Ouyang Ke from the 'Steel Needle Rain' launched by Huang Rong, but now Ouyang Feng had placed the blame on him. He knew Ouyang Ke must have lied to his uncle and his uncle was using that to discredit him. Hong Qigong was an honest, straightforward man and he did not want to argue; he simply laughed a big laugh, unplugged his wine gourd and took a big gulp.

Guo Jing could not keep his patience any longer, "It was Senior Qigong who saved your nephew's life; how could you say such thing to blame him?"

"Kid, we are still talking, how dare you interrupt?" Huang Yaoshi barked.

"Rong'er, tell him ... tell your Father what happened to Miss Cheng," Guo Jing hastily said.

Huang Rong knew her father's temperament very well; he was not one who followed customs and traditions. He often said, "What do those customs have to do with us?" His way of thinking was different from the common people of his time. What other people thought to be right, he would consider it wrong; what other people thought to be wrong, he might think it to be right. That was how he earned his title 'Eastern Heretic.' Huang Rong thought, "Ouyang Ke's behavior is really disgusting, but Father might think that he did what any normal romantic young man would do." She noticed that her father was looking at Guo Jing with fiery eyes so she hastily came up with an idea.

"I am not done with you," she said turning to Ouyang Ke, "That day when we were having a martial arts contest at the Zhao Palace you tied both your hands behind your back and said that you didn't need any hands to subdue me, did you not?" Ouyang Ke admitted with a nod of his head.

"Later on after I took Senior Qigong as my master we met again in Baoying," Huang Rong continued. "You said that no matter what kind of martial arts I used, whether it be from my father or the ones taught by Hong Qigong; you would only use your Uncle's martial arts to defeat me, didn't you?"

Ouyang Ke thought, "It was your own idea; I did not say such thing."

Seeing his hesitation Huang Rong quickly continued, "You drew a circle on the ground with your feet and said that if I could get you out of the circle using the martial arts I

learned from my father you would admit defeat, didn't you?" Ouyang Ke nodded again.

Turning to her father Huang Rong said, "Father, did you hear that? He did not have any respect for Hong Qigong and he did not have any respect for you. He said that the martial arts of the two of you are inferior to his uncle's and even if you two came together you still cannot defeat his uncle. I don't believe it."

"The little girl has a long tongue [she's stretching the truth]," Huang Yaoshi said. "Who among the people under the heavens do not know that Eastern Heretic, Western Poison, Southern Emperor and Northern Beggar's martial arts are like a pound to sixteen ounces? No one is superior to the others." Although his mouth said those words, he resented Ouyang Ke's arrogance, but he did not want to discuss this matter anymore. He turned his head to Hong Qigong and asked, "Brother Qi, your presence has brought honor to Peach Blossom Island. I wonder if there is anything I can do for you?"

"I've come here to ask you for a favor," Hong Qigong replied.

Although Hong Qigong loved to joke around, he was an honest and straightforward man, always upholding justice. His martial arts skill was very high, so Huang Yaoshi had always respected him. Huang Yaoshi knew that whatever business Hong Qigong was dealing with, it was always taken care of, if not personally, then with the help of his numerous Beggar Clan members. This time Hong Qigong was asking him for a favor. He was extremely delighted and said, "We have been friends for dozens of years; if Brother Qi has anything to ask, how can your younger brother not oblige?"

“Don’t comply too quickly,” Hong Qigong said, “I am afraid this matter is not easy to manage.”

Huang Yaoshi smiled, “If the matter was easy, Brother Qi wouldn’t think of asking your younger brother.”

Hong Qigong clapped his hands. “That’s right!” he laughed, “That is the sign of a real friendship! You have decided to comply to my request then?”

“Speak up!” Huang Yaoshi said. “Even if it means going through fire or water, I’ll do it.”

Ouyang Feng swung his snake staff and opened his mouth, “Slow down Brother Yao, first we must ask Brother Qi what it is that he wants.”

Hong Qigong laughed. “Old Poison, this matter does not concern you. You are being nosy. You’d better prepare your belly to drink ‘celebratory wine’.” [xi jiu - the term used for wine served at a wedding banquet.]

“Drink ‘celebratory wine’?” Ouyang Feng wondered.

“That’s correct,” Hong Qigong replied, “‘Celebratory wine’.” Pointing to Guo Jing and Huang Rong he continued, “These two are my disciples; I have agreed to ask Brother Yao on their behalf to let them marry each other. Brother Yao has agreed to it.”

Guo Jing and Huang Rong were both frightened and happy at the same time. They exchanged glances with each other. Ouyang Feng and his nephew, as well as Huang Yaoshi, were startled.

“Brother Qi!” Ouyang Feng said, “You are wrong! Brother Yao’s ‘precious one’ [qian jin - thousand gold] was betrothed to my nephew earlier. We came to Peach Blossom

Island today to deliver the dowry and arrange for the ceremony.”

“Brother Yao,” Hong Qigong asked, “Is that so?”

“I am afraid so,” Huang Yaoshi replied, “Brother Qi, please don’t play jokes on your younger brother.”

Hong Qigong put on a sour face. “Who plays jokes on you?” he said. “You have betrothed your daughter to two families; your family’s reputation is at stake here.” Turning his head to Ouyang Feng he asked, “I am the Guo family’s primary matchmaker, where is yours?”

Ouyang Feng was dumbfounded; he did not expect Hong Qigong to ask him that question. Stammering he tried to answer, “Brother Yao has consented to this marriage, I have also consented; why would we need a matchmaker?”

“Are you aware that there is somebody who has not consented to this arrangement?” Hong Qigong cut him off.

“Who?” Ouyang Feng asked.

“Ha ... ha ... it’s yours truly, the Old Beggar Hong!” Hong Qigong laughed.

As soon as Ouyang Feng heard this and knowing Hong Qigong’s character to be strong-willed and his conduct to be firm and resolute, he knew a fight was unavoidable; his face did not show even a slight change but he delayed saying anything.

Hong Qigong smiled, “Your nephew’s behavior was improper. How could he be compared to Brother Yao’s beautiful-as-a-flower daughter? If you force them to get married, they will fight over all kinds of things everyday and they might end up killing each other. What good would it do?”

Huang Yaoshi listened attentively and his heart was stirred. He looked at Huang Rong, who was gazing lovingly at Guo Jing. Then he looked at Guo Jing. He hated this dumb kid to the core...Guo Jing's intelligence was questionable; he knew nothing of literature or martial arts or music, chess, calligraphy and painting. He would not be a talented scholar or a gallant knight. Both he and his wife were intelligent people and he knew their only daughter's brainpower was not far below theirs. If he let this scatterbrain marry his daughter, it would be like throwing a fresh flower into cow dung.

Right now he saw Guo Jing standing alongside Ouyang Ke; he could not help but compare those two. Ouyang Ke's intelligence and smart appearance was a hundred times better than Guo Jing's. His mind was set to take this young man as his son-in-law. But Hong Qigong's face showed he would not easily give up; so he cooked up a scheme and said, "Brother Feng [Feng Xiong], your nephew is injured. You'd better take care of that first; we will discuss this matter further later."

Ouyang Feng had been worried about his nephew's condition for a while and was hoping Huang Yaoshi would give them a chance to take care of his injuries. He immediately beckoned his nephew and the two walked back into the bamboo grove. Huang Yaoshi then engaged Hong Qigong in some pleasantries.

In about the time needed to cook some rice later, the uncle and nephew returned to the pavilion. Ouyang Feng had extracted the steel needles from his nephew's body and mended the broken rib as well.

"My daughter's posture is as weak as a willow tree; she is stubborn, disobedient and hardly worthy to be a gentleman's wife. But Brother Qi and Brother Feng have

both unexpectedly given me the highest honor by asking her hand in marriage. My daughter was already betrothed to Mr. Ouyang, but Brother Qi's request is also difficult not to accept. I have an idea and I wonder if you two brothers would tell me if this idea will work or not?" Huang Yaoshi said.

"Say it quickly ... say it quickly!" Hong Qigong interrupted. "The Old Beggar doesn't like listening to your twisting and flowery words."

Huang Yaoshi smiled faintly. "Brothers, even though this daughter of mine is unworthy, I still hope she will find a good husband," he continued. "Mr. Ouyang is Brother Feng's honorable nephew, while Mr. Guo is Brother Qi's outstanding disciple. Both are very fine gentlemen and it is very difficult to choose one of them. I have no alternative but to come up with a three-subject test and I will betroth my daughter to whoever passes this test. I will not favor either one of them. Will both old friends tell me if this idea is good?"

Ouyang Feng clapped his hands. "Clever! Wonderful!" he called out. "The only thing is, my nephew is injured; if the test involves martial arts then we have to wait until he is fully recovered." He had seen the fierceness of Guo Jing's attack that injured his nephew; he knew that if they contended in martial arts his nephew would no doubt lose. So he used his nephew's injury to their best advantage.

"Certainly," Huang Yaoshi said. "A martial arts contest would harm the good relationships between two families anyway."

Hong Qigong thought in his heart, "This is so typical of Old Heretic Huang. We all are Wulin people; if the test involves literary and not martial arts skill, do you expect an



‘academic scholar’ [zhuang yuan] to become your son-in-law? If you come up with music or poetry, even if he was reincarnated, my stupid disciple will not be able to take the test. Your mouth says no favorites, but obviously you totally favor the other side. My stupid disciple will lose for sure. This is confounding! I will fight Old Poison first and talk later.” He looked upwards and laughed hard; then, staring at Ouyang Feng he said, “We are all martial arts practitioners; instead of a contest of martial arts, would you prefer to have an eating contest or defecating race? Your nephew is injured, but you are not. Come ... come ... come! We will fight in their stead.”

Without waiting for an answer he sent his palm towards Ouyang Feng’s shoulder. Ouyang Feng stepped back several feet. Hong Qigong put his bamboo staff down on a small bamboo table. “Watch out for this!” he shouted. While his words were still hanging in the air both his palms had already moved seven times in rapid succession.

Ouyang Feng dodged to the left and evaded to the right and all seven attacks flew past. His right hand shoved the snake staff into the bricks in front of the pavilion, and in a flash his left hand had also sent seven counterattacks.

Huang Yaoshi cheered, but did not prevent them from fighting. He wanted to watch these two world-class martial arts masters, who were his peers, and see what kind of improvements had they made twenty years after their last meeting.

Both Hong Qigong and Ouyang Feng were the experts of their respective martial arts schools. They had reached the pinnacle of their martial arts twenty years ago. After the Sword Meet of Mount Hua both had trained hard and improved their skills tremendously. Their skills were incomparable to when they had their meet on Mount Hua

and now they meet again on Peach Blossom Island. Each launched swift attacks and counterattacks, but they were actually still probing their opponent's skills. Both combatants exchanged fast and forceful palms and fists so that the gusts of wind created swayed the bamboo leaves around them. Although they were only testing each other, their moves carried profound martial arts techniques.

On the sideline Guo Jing was watching with full attention; whether it was an attack or a defense, every single move was a wonderful one and beyond his wildest imagination. The 'Nine Yin Manual' contained the deepest martial arts theory in the world whether it be internal or external energy cultivation, bare hands or swordplay, and other kinds of the most profound martial arts imaginable. After Guo Jing memorized the content by heart and even though he did not understand every single one of them, those theories were actually ingrained in his brain. Now as he watched those two combatants exchanging exquisite moves, those theories came flooding back into his mind, forming a fuzzy shadow in his brain.

Earlier he'd listened to Huang Yaoshi and Ouyang Feng's flute versus zither battle. That was an invisible internal energy battle and it was extremely difficult to clearly see their relationship to the theory in the manual. This time the battle was fists and kicks and much easier to perceive. In his delight, his heart was itching to try what he had seen.

Very quickly Hong Qigong and Ouyang Feng had exchanged more than three hundred stances. Both were surprised at their opponent's skill and could not help but praise each other in their hearts. On the side-lines Huang Yaoshi looked on with a sigh and thought, "I have trained myself painstakingly on Peach Blossom Island and I thought, after Wang Chongyang passed away, my martial arts would be number one in the world. Who would have thought that the

Old Beggar and Old Poison have both taken their own paths and reached these frightfully respectable levels of martial arts?"

Both Ouyang Ke and Huang Rong were deep in their own thoughts and each hoped that their side would gain a quick victory. But they actually could not comprehend the exquisiteness of the martial arts being displayed in front of their eyes. From the corner of her eye Huang Rong saw a black shadow dancing erratically with flailing hands and feet moving constantly. She turned her head and discovered that the shadow was Guo Jing. Guo Jing's expression was strange and it looked like he was in ecstasy. Her heart skipped a beat. "Jing ge ge!" she called with a low voice.

Guo Jing did not hear her; he was too busy moving his hands and feet. Huang Rong felt anxious, so she watched attentively and discovered that Guo Jing was actually imitating Hong Qigong and Ouyang Feng's movements.

By now those two had changed the way they were fighting; every fist and every kick was sent out slowly. Sometimes they would stand still for a moment, and then send out a fist. After they exchanged one stance, they would sit down on the ground to take a rest; then stand up and exchange another move. In fact, the way they were fighting was slower than two disciples practicing martial arts. But looking at their faces, one could see the seriousness of their expressions, almost to the point of being very tense.

Huang Rong glanced towards her father and saw him looking intently at those two and his face was also unusually tense. Ouyang Ke was the only person around who'd maintained his calmness. He looked at her flirtatiously while lightly waving his folding fan.

Guo Jing saw an unconventional move and he could not restrain from cheering loudly. Ouyang Ke was irritated, "Your dirty kid does not understand anything, what is he shouting about?"

"Just because you don't understand, how would you know whether or not other people understand?" Huang Rong shot back.

Ouyang Ke laughed, "He's just flailing his hands and feet foolishly. Given his young age, how would he know the wonder of my uncle's divine martial arts?"

"You are not him; how would you know what he knows?" Huang Rong replied.

While the two were bickering on the side, Huang Yaoshi and Guo Jing turned a deaf ear on them; they were watching the fight with rapt attention.

By that time both Hong Qigong and Ouyang Feng were squatting on the ground; one with his left middle finger pointed to his forehead and the other used both hands to cover his ears. Both were thinking very hard with their eyes closed. Suddenly they shouted and simultaneously leapt towards each other; one sent his fist and the other used his leg; then they separated again.

Those two people had reached the level where each and every single one of the martial arts belonging to their own family or school had no flaws whatsoever. However, they both knew that no matter how fierce their stance was, the opponent would easily break it. Therefore, they had to create a new and unknown move in order to gain the upper hand.

After their sword meet twenty years ago, both men, one residing on the Central Plains, the other from the Western

Regions, had not met or even heard of the other's present state, so they did not know how much the other man had improved his martial arts. Now that they were fighting each other, the situation was not much different. Each had his own strengths; each had his own weaknesses and neither could tell who would overcome who. In the meantime the moonlight had faded and one could see a streak of sunlight glowing in the east. Both had racked their brains and had created innumerable new and wonderful moves; fist or palm techniques along with tens of thousands variations thereof, but still, no one could tell which one was better.

Guo Jing witnessed the fight between two top experts of the present age's martial arts world; wonderful moves and exquisite techniques came one after another. Sometimes he understood, but more often he did not. Sometimes he saw something that was related to the theory taught him by Zhou Botong which made him excited and he wanted to try. But before he could finish half a stance, Hong Qigong and Ouyang Feng had already launched new moves and Guo Jing had already forgotten the previous move he was trying to master.

When Huang Rong saw Guo Jing like that, she was alarmed. "I have not seen him for dozens of days; could it be that he's had some profound martial arts lessons from a divine being?" she thought, "I'm watching the fight and I got confused; how could he exclaim in admiration?" But then another thought came to her mind, "Could it be that this silly brother of mine missed me so much that he went insane?"

She had not seen Guo Jing for quite some time and now that they've seen each other again, the situation was not conducive for them to be affectionate. She moved forward, wanting to hold Guo Jing's hand. Right at that moment Guo Jing was imitating Ouyang Feng's palm technique; he was

turning his body around and launched a palm attack. It looked ordinary, but in actuality it carried enormous hidden energy. Her hand barely touched Guo Jing's palm when she suddenly felt a surge of incredible energy pushing her. She was sent flying upward.

After touching Huang Rong's hand, Guo Jing came back to reality. "Aiyo!" he shouted and jumped up to grab Huang Rong's waist. While falling back down to the ground, Guo Jing's left hand grabbed the bamboo pavilion's eave. He swung their bodies and they landed on the roof. The two sat shoulder to shoulder on top of the bamboo pavilion watching the fight on the ground.

By that time the battle situation on the ground had changed again. Ouyang Feng was squatting on the ground with both arms bent at the shoulder, resembling a big frog about to strike at its enemy. His mouth created some deep rumbling noises like a cow mooing; sometimes it was audible and sometimes it wasn't.

Huang Rong was amused; she smiled and with a low voice asked, "Jing ge ge, what is he doing?"

"I don't know," Guo Jing replied. But suddenly he remembered Zhou Botong's story about Wang Chongyang's 'Solitary Yang Finger' breaking Ouyang Feng's 'Toad Stance'. "That must be it!" he exclaimed, "This is his fiercest martial art; it is called the 'Toad Stance'."

Huang Rong clapped her hands and laughed, "He does look like a toad!"

Ouyang Ke had observed the two sitting close and leaning toward each other, talking and laughing; his heart was burning with jealousy. He wanted to leap up and fight Guo Jing, but his chest was still hurting and he could not exert any strength. Besides, he did not have any confidence that

his martial arts were superior to Guo Jing's. But hearing Huang Rong say 'he looks like a toad' he thought they were ridiculing him and saying that he looked like a dirty toad desiring to eat swan's meat [a lascivious man lusting after an innocent maiden?]; he was furious. With his right hand holding three hidden projectiles he quietly walked around toward the back of the bamboo pavilion. Gritting his teeth he moved his hand and three silvery streaks flew towards Guo Jing's chest.

In the meantime Hong Qigong was launching his palms to the front and to the back, busily fighting Ouyang Feng's 'Toad Stance' with his Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms. These two martial arts were the highest skills of each combatant, so the fight was no longer slow and sluggish like it was before. Now it became fierce as the two used their dozens of years of martial arts training trying to gain victory; life or death could be decided in the twinkling of an eye. Guo Jing had learned the Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms, but he had not seen his master using this technique before. It sent shivers along his spine to see how wonderful the palm techniques were, with infinite variations in them. It was truly incomparable to the ones he had already mastered. He was completely captivated with what was happening on the ground; why would he expect that someone would sneak in from behind and stealthily attack him?

Huang Rong was not aware that the two fighting on the ground were using their highest martial arts skills; she was still laughing and joking around when she suddenly realized one person was missing from the bamboo pavilion. Her mind immediately went to Ouyang Ke since she was afraid of his craftiness. Her eyes scanned the area, but it was her ears that heard the wind generated by the hidden projectiles coming towards Guo Jing's back. From the

corner of her eye she could see three silvery streaks coming fast. She did not have time to think and immediately threw herself behind Guo Jing's back. "Puff...puff...puff!" three hidden projectiles landed squarely in her back. She was wearing the 'Soft Hedgehog Armor' [ruan wei jia] so she was not injured, but she felt some pain nonetheless.

Her hand reached back and grabbed the hidden projectiles. She turned around and smiled sweetly, "You are scratching the itch on my back, aren't you? Thank you, but I need to give these back to you."

Ouyang Ke saw how she intercepted the projectiles with her own body to protect Guo Jing and he was more jealous than ever. Hearing what she said he thought she was going to throw the projectiles back his way, so he readied himself. But after a moment he saw Huang Rong holding the projectiles in her hand palm up, as though she was expecting him to take them back from her hand.

Ouyang Ke kicked his left foot and leaped to the bamboo pavilion's roof. He intended to show off his lightness kungfu and, lightly perched on the edge of the roof, he looked like a white shadow swaying gently in the wind. It was indeed an excellent skill; as elegant as that of a deity.

"Your lightness kungfu is truly wonderful!" Huang Rong exclaimed. She stood up and walked towards him, arm extended with the projectiles in her hand.

Ouyang Ke saw her white complexion and he was mesmerized. Absentmindedly he stretched out his hand to take the projectiles, with the ill intention of rubbing her hand. Suddenly some metallic streaks came his way. He had twice fallen for Huang Rong's tricks and did not want to repeat it. He somersaulted down from the roof waving his



sleeve and parrying an abundance of Huang Rong's steel needles.

Huang Rong giggled and threw the three silver projectiles to the ground, right in front of the squatting Ouyang Feng.

"NO! Don't!" Guo Jing shouted in alarm. He grabbed Huang Rong's waist and jumped down from the roof. Before his feet even touched the ground he heard Huang Yaoshi's anxious shout, "Brother Feng have mercy!"

Guo Jing felt an earth-shattering force coming his way. Quickly he pushed Huang Rong aside and exerted all his strength to his hands with one of the Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms, the 'Sighting a Dragon in the Fields' [jian long zai tian].

A loud 'bang' was heard as his force collided with Ouyang Feng's 'Toad Stance'. As a result he staggered back seven or eight steps. Guo Jing felt blood rising from his chest to his throat. He was alarmed and also afraid Ouyang Feng would send another attack, so he forced himself to move and stood in front of Huang Rong, ready to take another blow. Then he saw Hong Qigong and Huang Yaoshi had already stepped in between them.

"I'm so sorry! I am so ashamed!" Ouyang Feng said as he stood up. "I was not able to retract my force. I hope I did not hurt the young lady, did I?" he called out.

Actually Huang Rong was frightened and her beautiful face was pale; but hearing him say such a thing, she put on a bold face and laughed, "With my Father around, how could you hurt me?"

Huang Yaoshi was very anxious; he took her hands and quietly asked, "Do you feel anything different in your body? Quickly breathe in and out a few times." Huang Rong

listened to her father and quietly circulate her 'chi' but did not feel anything unusual, so she laughed and shook her head.

Huang Yaoshi was relieved. "Your two uncles are practicing their martial arts just now, what was a little girl like you doing carelessly intervening?" he reprimanded. "Uncle Ouyang's 'Toad Stance' is not a small matter; if he had not shown you mercy, do you think your little life would be spared?"

In order to launch the powerful 'Toad Stance', Ouyang Feng had to concentrate all of his strength in the whole of his body. As soon as the opponent attacked, he would be able to counterattack by launching the full power already stored. That was exactly what happened when he was waiting for Hong Qigong to attack; his strength was concentrated, ready to be launched like an arrow on a completely drawn bow. Unexpectedly Huang Rong tossed something at him that he instinctively counterattacked towards her.

When he realized it was Huang Rong he was extremely shocked; but his force had already being released so there was no way he could pull it back. He sighed inwardly, thinking he had created a terrible disaster and that this beautiful flower-of-a-girl would die a violent death at his hands. Moreover he'd heard Huang Yaoshi call out, 'Brother Feng, have mercy!' He frantically tried to divert his force, but there simply was not enough time. Then he suddenly felt another force colliding with his. He took this opportunity to retract his force. When he looked carefully, he discovered that the person who rescued Huang Rong was Guo Jing! He secretly admired Hong Qigong, "The Old Beggar is very good; he has succeeded in teaching this young disciple to such a high level of martial arts!"

Huang Yaoshi had seen Guo Jing's martial arts at Cloud Manor; he thought, "This youngster did not know the height of the sky or the depth of the earth, yet he dared to parry Ouyang Feng's fierce 'Toad Stance'. If Ouyang Feng had not seen my face and showed him mercy, his bones would have been shattered." He did not know that the Guo Jing he met at Cloud Manor was not the same Guo Jing as now. However, he acknowledged that Guo Jing had selflessly saved Huang Rong's life without any regard for his own safety. His hatred towards him was, for the most part, gone. He thought, "This kid really has a good heart and he really loves Rong'er. I can't give Rong'er to him, but I can certainly reward him by teaching him something." The rascal in front of him looked rather stupid and the word 'foolish' had stirred up anger in him.

"Old Poison...you are really good!" Hong Qigong called out, "But victory or defeat has not been decided yet; let us fight again!"

"Very well!" Ouyang Feng replied, "I will risk my life to accompany a gentleman's play!"

"I am not a gentleman," Hong Qigong laughed. "You are risking your life to play with a beggar!" With a jump he was standing in the courtyard again.

Ouyang Feng was about to join him when Huang Yaoshi suddenly lifted his left hand, "Hold it!" he called out, "Brother Qi, Brother Feng, you have fought for more than one thousand moves and you two are equally strong. Today the two of you are Peach Blossom Island's honored guests; you are entitled to drink several cups of your brother's own wine. The sword meet at Mount Hua is at hand. At that time not only will you two see who will gain a victory, but your brother, along with the Southern Emperor will be there to

practice our martial arts. Why don't we end today's contest right now?"

"That's fine with me!" Ouyang Feng laughed, "If this fight continues, I will be forced to admit defeat very soon anyway."

Hong Qigong turned back and laughed, "Old Western Poison is crafty; when he said he will admit defeat, he actually means he's going to win. I don't believe what he said one bit."

"Well, then," Ouyang Feng replied, "Let me ask Brother Qi's expert opinion again."

Hong Qigong flicked his sleeve and said, "Nothing would be better!"

"I see," Huang Yaoshi interrupted, "So your arrival on Peach Blossom Island today is actually to show off your martial arts," he said with a smile.

Hong Qigong roared in laughter. "Brother Yao is right! We came here to ask your daughter's hand in marriage, not to fight each other."

"I said earlier that I am going to provide three subjects to test both gentlemen," Huang Yaoshi continued, "The one that passes the test will be my son-in-law; but the one fails won't be going home empty handed either."

"What? Do you have another daughter?" Hong Qigong asked.

Huang Yaoshi smiled, "No, I don't. Even if I found another wife, I don't think we want to wait that long do we? Your brother has many other skills: medical, astrology and a lot of other stuff. To the gentleman who fails the test, so long as he does not belittle my shallow knowledge and is willing to

learn one particular subject, I will devote my time and teach him with all of my heart so that he won't leave Peach Blossom Island empty handed."

Hong Qigong was fully aware of Huang Yaoshi's abilities; he thought that if Guo Jing could not be his son-in-law but managed to learn just one skill from him, he would gain a lifelong benefit nonetheless. He thought that whatever subjects the tests would be, Guo Jing would undoubtedly suffer a loss and he felt badly for him.

Ouyang Feng, noticing Hong Qigong's reluctance, took the opportunity to say, "Good...let it be that way! Brother Yao has actually accepted my nephew's proposal, but he honored Brother Qi's face. So let these two kids be tested. That way it won't damage our friendship." Turning towards Ouyang Ke he said, "Later, should you lose, you will only have your own lack of ability to blame and you cannot blame anyone else. We will happily drink Brother Yao's vintage wine [xi jiu]. If you later have a mind to create other problems, not only will these two seniors not let you off easily, but I myself will not spare you."

Hong Qigong looked up and burst out in laughter, "Old Poison, you are ninety percent sure that you are going to win. Your speech was actually directed at me and my disciple; what you are saying is 'be a dear and just admit defeat'."

Ouyang Feng smiled and said, "Who wins and who loses, how would you know in advance? Even for people of our level, do you think it is easy to claim victory so shamelessly? Brother Yao, please present the subjects of your test."

Huang Yaoshi had determined to give his daughter to Ouyang Ke, therefore, he had to come up with three subjects that would guarantee victory for Ouyang Ke. But

first of all, a man of his stature could not be blatantly one-sided; secondly, he did not want to offend Hong Qigong. But while he was still carefully considering what he was about to say, Hong Qigong opened his mouth, "We all live by our fists and kicks, the test Brother Yao will administer must be related to martial arts. If your subjects are poetry, music, reciting scriptures or painting, then we - master and disciple, will simply admit defeat and take our butts out of here; there's no need to lose face."

"Naturally," Huang Yaoshi assured him, "The first subject is a martial arts competition."

"That won't do," Ouyang Feng said, "My nephew is injured at present."

Huang Yaoshi smiled. "I know that," he said, "I cannot let two brothers have a martial arts contest on Peach Blossom Island and damage their friendship."

"They are not going to fight?" Ouyang Feng was baffled.

"That's correct," Huang Yaoshi answered.

"Ah!" Ouyang Feng smiled, "Then the test giver will try each person's martial arts?"

Huang Yaoshi shook his head, "No, if I do that, no one can guarantee that I will be fair since I can make my moves heavy or light at will. Brother Feng, you and Brother Qi have reached the pinnacle of your respective martial arts skills and the fight just now was the proof. You have fought for more than a thousand moves, yet nobody knows who gained victory or suffered defeat. Brother Feng, you test Brother Guo, and Brother Qi, you try Brother Ouyang."

Hong Qigong thought to himself, "This is very fair indeed. Old Heretic Huang is really smart to have thought of this

method. Old Beggar would never come up with something like that." He laughed and said, "This method is not bad! Come...come...come! Let us play!" He beckoned Ouyang Ke.

"Wait!" Huang Yaoshi said, "There are some rules for the game we need to address. Rule number one: Brother Ouyang is injured and he cannot exert any energy; both of them, therefore, will be tested in terms of martial arts, not in terms of strength. Rule number two: The four of you will fight on top of these pine trees," he pointed to two big pine trees outside the bamboo pavilion, "The junior who falls to the ground first will lose. Rule number three: Brother Feng and Brother Qi, if one of you puts too heavy a pressure on the junior and accidentally injures him, he will lose."

"Injuring a junior is considered losing?" Hong Qigong mused.

"Certainly," Huang Yaoshi explained, "The two of you have such high skills, so if I didn't have this rule, should you put forth a heavy hand, do you think the junior will live? Brother Qi, if you even scratch Brother Ouyang's skin, you lose. The same goes for Brother Feng. Of these two juniors, one will be my son-in-law; how can they be injured by your hands?"

Hong Qigong scratched his head and laughed, "Old Heretic Huang is quite strange and really lives up to his reputation. Injuring an opponent will be considered a loss; this strange rule has never been heard of in thousands of years. Fine! As long as it is fair, the Old Beggar will comply."

Huang Yaoshi gave a hand signal and the four of them jumped up into the pine trees, forming two parties. Hong Qigong and Ouyang Ke were in the right tree and Ouyang Feng and Guo Jing in the left. Hong Qigong still had an

amused look on his face, while the other three looked serious, almost tense.

Huang Rong knew Ouyang Ke's martial arts were actually higher than Guo Jing's, but luckily he was injured. However, the competition on top of the pine trees relies heavily on lightness kungfu, in which Ouyang Ke obviously had some advantages over Guo Jing. She was unable to avoid feeling anxious. In the meantime she heard her father's loud and clear voice, "I will count to three, then you can start. Brother Ouyang, Brother Guo, whoever falls to the ground first will lose!"

Huang Rong thought of helping Guo Jing somehow, but Ouyang Feng's martial arts were very high; how could she fight him with her present abilities?

Huang Yaoshi had started counting, "One...two...three!" Four shadows danced on top of the pine trees; they had begun.

Huang Rong's gaze never left Guo Jing and saw him fight more than ten stances against Ouyang Feng in the blink of an eye. Both Huang Rong and Huang Yaoshi were secretly surprised, "How did his martial arts suddenly improve by leaps and bounds? He's managed to fight this many moves without showing any signs of losing."

Ouyang Feng was anxious, so he gradually increased his strength bit by bit. But he was afraid to injure Guo Jing. Suddenly an idea came into his mind and his legs rotated like a wheel, trying to sweep Guo Jing from the pine tree. Guo Jing used the 'Flying Dragon Soaring Through the Heavens' [fei long zai tian] from his Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms; he repeatedly leaped high with both palms hacking down like knives trying to hit his opponent's legs.



Huang Rong's heart was thumping madly. She turned her gaze toward Hong Qigong only to see his fight taking a different path. Ouyang Ke was using his lightness kungfu and leaped to the east and dodged to the west; he did not want to engage with even half of Hong Qigong's moves. Hong Qigong was compelled to chase him, but Ouyang Ke kept running around. Hong Qigong thought, "This stinky creature is cunning and he is trying to buy time. Guo Jing is a dumb kid; he actually fights the Old Poison. If he keeps it up, he will certainly fall to the ground first. Humph! Little rapist! Do you think the Old Beggar cannot fold you under my arm?" Suddenly he leaped high into the air and with fingers like two steel claws he struck towards Ouyang Ke's head.

Ouyang Ke saw that this incoming force was swift and fierce; it was certainly not a contest type attack but was intended to take his life. He was shocked and hastily tried to flee to the right. Unbeknownst to him, Hong Qigong's attack was a feint. Hong Qigong had anticipated this movement and as soon as Ouyang Ke turned right, Hong Qigong bent over mid-air and flew to the right. His hands came fast towards Ouyang Ke and he shouted clearly, "I don't care if I lose; today I am going to kill you stinky kid."

Ouyang Ke was startled because Hong Qigong was able to turn his body in mid-air; he was frightened and froze for a moment after hearing Hong Qigong's shout. He did not dare to parry this attack, so he frantically stepped back onto empty air. He fell down from the tree with this thought in his mind, "I've lost the first test!" Suddenly he heard a rustling noise beside him as Guo Jing also fell down from the tree next to him.

After fighting Guo Jing for quite a while, Ouyang Feng lost patience, "If I let this kid fight me for another fifty moves, how can I maintain the Western Poison's pride?" he

thought. Suddenly a wicked thought came into his mind. His left hand moved lightning fast towards Guo Jing's neck while shouting loudly, "Down you go!"

Guo Jing ducked this attack and lifted his left hand and tried to parry with the back of his hand. But Ouyang Feng suddenly put more force into his hand. "You ... you ..." Guo Jing stammered. He was going to say, "You don't follow Huang Yaoshi's rules?" but was not able to say it because he was forced to use all his energy to withstand this attack. Ouyang Feng smiled and coldly said, "I what?" and put even more force into his hand.

Guo Jing tried to get a strong foothold for fear that he might be internally injured by this 'Toad Stance' force. Who could have imagined that the tremendous force pushing him down would suddenly disappear? It was fortunate for him that his skills had improved; if not, he wouldn't have been able to withstand Ouyang Feng's force which suddenly got stronger, then suddenly disappeared. Luckily it was similar to the seventy-two moves of the 'Vacant Fist' he learned from Zhou Botong, in which a hard force contained softness in it. If not for this knowledge he would've been injured just like when he fought Huang Yaoshi at Cloud Manor and his hand was caught and broken. Nevertheless, he lost his balance and was thrown down from the tree head first.

Ouyang Ke fell down right side up, while Guo Jing fell upside down and both men saw the ground approaching fast. Seeing Guo Jing falling beside him Ouyang Ke had an idea; he stretched his hands toward Guo Jing's legs. He wanted to use Guo Jing as a stepping stone, so he would be able to jump back up while Guo Jing would certainly fall faster to the ground. Or so he thought.

Huang Rong noticed Guo Jing's precarious situation and called out, "Aiyo!" But incredibly it was Guo Jing who she saw jumping back up into the tree while, with a loud crash, Ouyang Ke was hitting the ground. Guo Jing landed on a tree branch out of breath and panting hard.

Huang Rong was extremely delighted. She did not see clearly how it happened or how, at the critical moment, Guo Jing was able to turn defeat into victory, but she was delighted nonetheless and was unable to restrain herself from crying out, "Aiyo!" But those two 'aiyos' carried entirely different emotions.

By that time Ouyang Feng and Hong Qigong had already come down from the trees. Hong Qigong was laughing hard and repeatedly uttered, "Wonderful! Wonderful!" Ouyang Feng's face was green with anger. "Brother Qi," he said gloomily, "Your smart disciple's martial arts are so diverse as to even include Mongolian wrestling skills."

Hong Qigong laughed and said, "I don't know how to wrestle, so it wasn't me who taught him. You can't blame me."

What really happened was: as Guo Jing was pushed down by Ouyang Ke, he fell faster. He saw Ouyang Ke's legs flying up right in front of him. He did not have time to think. In that critical moment he instinctively stretched out both arms to grab Ouyang Ke's calves and pulled himself up by twisting his body from the upside-down position to the upright one. It was precisely a wrestling technique the Mongolians used.

The Mongolians had trained and perfected their wrestling techniques for generations; they were considered one of the best. Guo Jing grew up on the Mongolian steppes and before he even learned martial arts from the Six Freaks of

Jiangnan he had played and wrestled everyday with Tolui and his friends. Mongolian wrestling was to him as natural as eating rice. He was slow by nature and he was falling down fast; even though he knew Mongolian wrestling techniques he would not have had enough time to think. He didn't consciously think: "Oh, a pair of legs, nice! Hey, why don't I use those legs to jump back up into the tree?" It happened so fast so that even after he managed to land on his feet on a tree branch he did not know what had happened! And so he won against all odds.

Huang Yaoshi shook his head slightly and thought, "This Guo Jing is a slow-witted kid. This victory is obviously due to sheer luck." He gave his decision, "The first test was won by Worthy Nephew Guo [Guo Xianzhi]. Please do not to worry Brother Feng, you have taught your honorable nephew well. Who knows, maybe he will score victories in the second and third tests."

"Brother Yao, please present the second test," Ouyang Feng replied.

"The second test will be ..." Huang Yaoshi started, but before he could finish Huang Rong cut him off, "Father, you are obviously being one-sided. Just a moment ago you said you would only test their martial arts skill, how come you want to test with other subjects? Jing ge ge, you might as well admit defeat and leave."

"What do you know?" Huang Yaoshi said, "After reaching a certain level of martial arts skills, do you still want to fight everyday? Yes, we are martial arts people; but unlike ordinary military people, we don't live day after day for martial arts alone. Also, we don't amuse ourselves by jousting to find a spouse ..." After listening to this part, Huang Rong stole a glance at Guo Jing. Guo Jing was also looking at her. They were thinking of the same thing: Mu

Nianci and Yang Kang, who met each other in the capital by 'jousting to find a spouse'. In the meantime Huang Yaoshi continued his speech, "... My second test subject therefore is to ask these two nephews to listen to this old man playing a tune on my flute."

Ouyang Ke was ecstatic; he thought, "What does this stupid kid know about wind or string instruments? The victory is mine for sure."

Ouyang Feng on the other hand was not so sure. He suspected that Huang Yaoshi was going to test these two peoples' internal energy strength with the flute's sound. He knew Guo Jing's level of internal energy to be quite strong and his nephew would not necessarily exceed him. Also, he was afraid his nephew would be internally injured by Huang Yaoshi's flute sound. He said, "The Juniors' internal energy cultivation is shallow and I am afraid they won't be able to listen to Brother Yao's elegant melody. I wonder if Brother Yao would consider ..."

Huang Yaoshi did not give him a chance to finish, "My song is an ordinary one without any high level of internal energy. Brother Feng, set your heart at ease." Towards Ouyang Ke and Guo Jing he said, "Nephews, please take a bamboo stick and follow my music by tapping it to the rhythm. The one who can follow best will win the second test."

Guo Jing stepped forward and cupped his hands, "Island Master Huang, disciple is very slow and stupid. I know nothing about music, so let me admit defeat in the second test."

"Don't be hasty...don't be hasty," Hong Qigong intervened, "At worst you will lose, so why don't you try? Are you afraid that others will laugh in your face?"

Guo Jing thought his master made some sense; seeing Ouyang Ke take a bamboo stick he did the same.

“Brother Qi, Brother Feng,” Huang Yaoshi smiled, “Younger brother will show off his lack of ability.” Lifting the jade flute to his lips he started to blow. This part of his song did not carry any internal energy and it wasn’t any different than what an ordinary person would play.

Ouyang Ke listened attentively, trying to follow the rhythm; then he started tapping his bamboo stick correctly. Guo Jing did not have a clue, so he held his bamboo stick high in the air but did not dare tap it. It was only after Huang Yaoshi had played for about the time needed to drink a cup of tea, he began to move his stick.

The Ouyangs, uncle and nephew, were very smug. They thought that this time victory was guaranteed. Since the third subject would be literary, they were ninety percent sure they would win.

Huang Rong was feeling anxious so she lightly tapped her right hand finger on her left knuckles with the hope Guo Jing would follow. Who would have thought that Guo Jing would sit staring blankly at the sky, lost in thought; obviously he did not see her signal.

Huang Yaoshi kept blowing the flute. Guo Jing raised his hand and struck the bamboo stick in between two beats of the music. Ouyang Ke stifled a laugh, thinking that this stupid kid strikes on the wrong beat. Guo Jing struck again, still in between two music beats. He had struck four times with his bamboo stick, all in the wrong places.

Huang Rong shook her head in dismay, “My stupid brother does not understand anything about music,” she thought, “Father shouldn’t have tested him.” Having had this thought, she racked her brain, trying to find a way to

disrupt the test. But when she turned her gaze toward her father she was surprised; her father was showing astonishment in his face. She heard Guo Jing tap several more times and the flute sound suddenly became a little bit slow, but then it immediately resumed its original tempo.

Guo Jing kept tapping his bamboo stick, always on the off-beat: sometimes tapping faster, sometimes slower. He drove the tempo faster, and sometimes slower. On several occasions the music from the flute almost could not maintain its steady rhythm and was nearly forced to follow the bamboo stick's erratic tempo. Huang Yaoshi was not the only one who was astounded; Hong Qigong and Ouyang Feng also felt something strange was happening.

Actually Guo Jing remembered listening to the battle between the three people earlier: the flute, the zither and the whistle. He noticed that the sounds fought each other systematically, like a battle strategy in war. He did not have the slightest degree of comprehension about music theory, but listening to Huang Yaoshi's flute he wanted to try to battle that sound and thus he struck the bamboo stick erratically to disrupt the melody. He tapped the bamboo stick against an old bamboo tree, creating a loud 'bonk, bonk' sound. The sound made Huang Yaoshi feel like he was inside a hot furnace and the fire was glowing white hot, forcing the flute to surrender and follow the erratic tempo of the bamboo stick.

Huang Yaoshi's spirits were roused as he thought about this kid unexpectedly possessing this kind of ability. The flute sound changed again; this time it flowed faster and slower seemingly having infinite variations. Ouyang Ke only stopped to listen for a moment, then he could not resist lifting his bamboo stick and brandishing it erratically in the air. Ouyang Feng heaved a sigh, quickly took his nephew's hand, and pressed the main artery on his wrist. Then he

took out a silk handkerchief, tore it into two pieces and plugged Ouyang Ke's ears. After a while Ouyang Ke started to calm down and Ouyang Feng let his hand go.

Since her childhood Huang Rong had listened to her father's 'Jade-Colored Tidal Wave Song'; one time Huang Yaoshi even explained, in detail, every variation there was. The father and daughter's minds were like one so this song did not affect her at all, but she was fully aware that her father's flute carried enormous power. Therefore, she was worried that Guo Jing would not be able to defend himself.

This song simulated the vastness of the ocean with its thousands of waves, coming slowly from afar, and then crashing on the shores. The wave was foamy white and high as a mountain; but in the tide the fish leaped and the whale floated, while above the water seagulls flew. In a moment the water turned wild, like a group of devils was stirring it; the weather turned cold and icebergs came floating by. In another moment it turned hot, extremely hot, so that the sea was rippling and bubbling like boiling water. The next moment, just as quickly, the sea became calm and the surface was as smooth as a mirror. The water flowed strongly, yet quietly; but beneath the surface there was a very strong current threatening those who were unwittingly brave enough to enter and challenge its power. Such were the complexities of the song.

Guo Jing sat cross-legged on the ground as he exerted the Quanzhen Sect's internal energy to suppress the turmoil in his heart and refresh his spirit, all the while resisting the temptation of the flute's sound. At the same time he kept tapping the bamboo stick disrupting the flute's song.

When Huang Yaoshi, Hong Qigong and Ouyang Feng were battling each other with sounds earlier, they were on the offensive and defensive alternately. They had to guard their



own hearts and minds while looking for an opportunity to launch a counterattack; each trying to subdue the other's hearts and minds. Guo Jing's internal energy was much inferior to those three; he was only able to put up a strong defense, without being able to launch a counterattack. But Huang Yaoshi was not able to penetrate his defense either.

After a long while, the volume of the flute gradually decreased, making it difficult to hear. Guo Jing stopped tapping to listen. This was the moment Huang Yaoshi was waiting for; unexpectedly, as the sound became softer, the stronger the energy it carried. Because Guo Jing was listening attentively, his heart began to follow the rhythm of the flute. Had this happened to someone else, they would fall into the trap and would not be able to escape; but Guo Jing was different. He had learned the 'Left/Right Mutual Hands Combat' and he was capable of dividing his mind. He used his left hand to take the shoe from his left foot to knock on the bamboo pole. "Knock! Knock! Knock!" again, disrupting the flute's sound.

Huang Yaoshi was startled, "This kid possesses some extraordinary skills; he truly cannot be underestimated." He started to walk around according to the 'Eight Trigrams' while he continued playing.

Both of Guo Jing's hands were striking the bamboo pole with an erratic tempo opposing the flute's rhythm. His hands were like two people joining forces to defend against Huang Yaoshi's attack. "Bonk...bonk...bonk! Knock...knock...knock!" His defensive power was doubled.

Hong Qigong and Ouyang Feng were quietly focusing their attention and energy guarding themselves against the internal energy battle between these two people. Even though one party was only on the defensive, they did not

dare to carelessly ignore the offensive energy from the flute.

The flute sound suddenly ran from high to low; ever changing, strange yet wonderful. Guo Jing suddenly felt a burst of cold air carried by the flute's sound. He felt like his body was wrapped in a thick layer of ice, which had him shivering violently.

The flute sound gently climbed up the hill, getting more and more intense. Guo Jing felt cold to his bones. He struggled hard to divert his mind and to think about a burning sun in the sky, or of touching iron exposed to the heat of the day, or of holding a burning coal in his hand, or that he was entering a very hot stove; in short, any kind of heat inducing thoughts. He succeeded. Huang Yaoshi saw Guo Jing's left side was blue and shivering from the cold, while his right side was red, sweltering from the heat.

Huang Yaoshi was inwardly amazed. Once again he changed the flute's sound: now winter had passed and summer came around. Guo Jing struggled hard to resist, but his clapping tempo began to follow the flute's rhythm. Huang Yaoshi said in his heart, "If this kid keeps on resisting like this - even though he is still young, he won't be able to withstand hot and cold successively and he will suffer a severe illness in the future." The flute sound became graceful, dispersing into the forest then stopped.

Guo Jing exhaled a long breath, stood up, staggered and nearly fell again to the ground. Only after taking several deep breaths did he manage to steady himself. He knew Huang Yaoshi was showing mercy; so he stepped forward, bowed and thanked him. "Thank you very much for showing mercy, Island Master Huang," he said, "Disciple is very grateful."

Huang Rong noticed Guo Jing's left hand was still holding his shoe and could not stifle a laugh, "Jing ge ge, put your shoe back on," she said.

"Yes," Guo Jing replied, and put the shoe back on his left foot.

A thought suddenly came into Huang Yaoshi's mind, "This kid is so young, yet his martial arts are actually quite profound. Could it be that he is just pretending to be a fool, but is in reality a very intelligent person? If that's the case, what would hinder me if I wanted to give my daughter to him?" A faint smile appeared on his face and he said, "You are very good, why do you still call me Island Master Huang?" What he was saying was, that since Guo Jing had won two out of three tests then Guo Jing should call him 'Father-in-law'.

Who would have thought that Guo Jing really did not have a clue as to what he was talking about, so he only stammered, "I ... I ..." his eyes looked at Huang Rong; asking for help. Huang Rong was in seventh heaven; she bent her right thumb, signaling Guo Jing he should kowtow. Guo Jing understood this signal, so he bent his knees and kowtowed four times to Huang Yaoshi, but he still did not open his mouth to speak.

Huang Yaoshi smiled and asked, "What do you kowtow to me for?"

"Rong'er told me to," Guo Jing answered honestly.

Huang Yaoshi sighed silently, "A dumb kid is a dumb kid," he thought. Extending his hand he took the silk handkerchiefs from Ouyang Ke's ears, and gave his decision. "Regarding internal energy, Nephew Guo is stronger; but my test subject was music knowledge, in which Nephew Ouyang is much better ... Let's just say that the second test was a

draw. I am going to present the third subject and let the two Nephews decide victory or defeat."

Ouyang Feng knew his nephew had lost, but he did not expect Huang Yaoshi would do him a favor, so he quickly replied, "True, true! Let them compete one more time."

Hong Qigong was upset but didn't say anything, he thought, "The girl is your daughter and others can't meddle. You want to give her to that rotten playboy. I've always wanted to fight you, but right now it is difficult for my two fists to fight your four hands. Wait until I ask Emperor Duan to help me. Then we'll see ..."

Huang Yaoshi produced a thin book with a red silk cover from his bosom and said, "My wife and I only had this one daughter. Unfortunately she died prematurely. Today Brother Feng and Brother Qi are both here to ask her hand in marriage. If my wife were here, I am sure she would be very delighted ..." Listening to her father speak, Huang Rong's eyes turned red. Huang Yaoshi continued, "This book was written by my wife the same year she passed away. It was the fruit of her hard work. I am going to let both Nephews read it and then recite it from memory. Whoever manages to recite the most will be betrothed to my daughter." He caught sight of Hong Qigong with a slight cold smile on his face, but he continued on, "Actually, Nephew Guo has won by one subject, but this book has impacted my life tremendously since my wife died because of it. Now I silently wish her soul in heaven will personally choose our son-in-law and that she will bless the Nephew that wins."

Hong Qigong could no longer maintain his patience. He shouted loudly and clearly, "Old Heretic Huang! Who wants to listen to your sentimental ghost story? You know perfectly well that my disciple is a dummy and does not

know books or poetry, yet you insist on testing him on that very subject. Then you frighten him with talk of your dead young wife. You are shameless!" He brushed his long sleeve and turned his body to walk away.

Huang Yaoshi sneered, "Brother Qi, if you came to Peach Blossom Island to flaunt your power, you still need to practice for several more years," he said coldly.

Hong Qigong stopped dead in his tracks, "What?" he raised his eyebrows, "You want to fight me?" he asked.

"You don't understand the 'Five Elements Strange Gates' [wu xing chi men...*referring to the maze-like pathways on the island*] techniques," Huang Yaoshi replied, "Don't even think of leaving this island alive without my permission."

Hong Qigong was angry, "I am going to burn down your smelly trees and flower bushes!"

"If you have the ability, go ahead and try!" Huang Yaoshi coldly challenged.

Guo Jing knew those two were about to fight and he also knew that Peach Blossom Island was not to be trifled with; he was afraid his master would fall into a trap on the island. He quickly stepped forward and said, "Island Master Huang, Shifu, let this disciple and big brother Ouyang compete in this book memorization contest. Disciple is really stupid; if I lose, I lose." But in his heart he was thinking, "I'll wait until Shifu is safe, then Rong'er and I will jump into the sea and swim as far as our strength will take us. Then we will die together in the sea."

"Great!" Hong Qigong said mockingly, "You just can't wait to lose face, can you? Be my guest, then! Be my guest." His thought was, 'if you are going to lose anyway, why compete?' He intended to take his disciples along and walk

away to the seashore, snatch a boat and sail away from the island. Who would have thought that this stupid disciple of his would not act according to the circumstance? He had no alternatives but to concede.

“Be a good girl and sit quietly. Don’t get any weird ideas,” Huang Yaoshi told his daughter.

Huang Rong did not say anything, but she expected Guo Jing would fail this next test. Her father said that he would let her deceased mother pick their son-in-law; that meant the previous two tests Guo Jing had won did not count at all. Of the three tests, Guo Jing had obviously won the second one, so the decision that it was a draw was hard to accept. In short, she believed that the reason her father insisted on administering the third test was so that Ouyang Ke would win. She started to cook up an escape plan as to how she would get Guo Jing off the island.

Huang Yaoshi told Ouyang Ke and Guo Jing to sit side by side on a big rock; then he presented the book in front of them. Ouyang Ke saw the cover was written in seal characters [the ones found on official documents] with the six characters, ‘Nine Yin Manual’ [jiu yin zhen jing]; he was ecstatic. “The ‘Nine Yin Manual’ is the world’s most profound martial arts manual; Father-in-law must be very fond of me to let me read this wonderful book.” Guo Jing, on the other hand, also saw the six characters but had no idea what they were; he thought, “He intentionally wants to make things difficult for me. How would I know those kinds of curving-tadpole characters? In any case I am going to admit defeat.”

Huang Yaoshi opened the cover and the book was actually written in normal characters. The handwriting was graceful and obviously written by a female hand. Guo Jing started to read and his heart skipped a beat. The first line read, “The

way of Heaven: A simple fix is not enough to repair damage; it truly is an empty victory, insufficient for a real one.” It was exactly like a sentence Zhou Botong told him to memorize. He looked further down and to his surprise, the sentences were the ones he already knew by heart.

Huang Yaoshi waited a moment, and when he thought the two had finished, he flipped the page. On the second page the words and phrases were slightly out of order, and further into the book, the sentences were becoming more confusing and the characters looked soft and weak.

Guo Jing’s heart was shaken again as he recalled Zhou Botong’s story of how Madame Huang had re-written the ‘Nine Yin Manual’ from memory and how it drained her emotionally and physically so that she died while giving birth to her child. This book was obviously the one she wrote before she died. “Could it be that what Big Brother Zhou taught me was the ‘Nine Yin Manual’?” he wondered in his heart. “No. It can’t be. The second volume of the ‘Nine Yin Manual’ was lost by Mei Chaofeng; where did he get it from?”

Huang Yaoshi saw him staring blankly, lost in thought and even looking dazed. He did not pay any further attention and slowly turned the pages one by one. At first Ouyang Ke was able to memorize what was written, but later on when it got to the training methods the sentences were garbled and there was no clear relationship between the previous and the next ones. Further into the book, even the characters were unclear. His heart sank and he could not help sighing inwardly, “It seems he is still unwilling to show me the real full-text Manual.” But then he had another thought, “Even though I can’t see the full Manual, compared to this dumb kid I am sure I have memorized more of the text. With this test my victory has been

decided.” Having had this thought he felt smug and could not help but cast a glance towards Huang Rong.

Huang Rong caught his glance and she stuck her tongue out while making an ugly face. “Brother Ouyang,” she said, “You captured Sister Mu and put her inside the coffin at the ancestral temple. You suffocated her to death. She came into my dreams last night; her hair was disheveled, her face covered with blood and she told me she is looking for you; she wants to take your life.”

Ouyang Ke had forgotten about her long ago and now, out of the blue, Huang Rong mentioned her name; he was startled, “Aiyo! I forgot to get her out of there!” He thought in his heart, “It’s a pity a young girl like her died of suffocation.” But then he noticed Huang Rong was smiling; apparently she was joking. “How did you know she was in the coffin? Did you rescue her?” he asked.

Ouyang Feng knew Huang Rong was trying to muddle his nephew’s mind, so that he would not be able to remember the text. “Ke’er,” he said, “Don’t bother with other matters; just concentrate on the book.” Ouyang Ke shivered. “Yes,” he said; and quickly turned his eyes back to the book.

Guo Jing noticed that the sentences in the book were nearly the same as the ones Zhou Botong taught him. The ones in his memory had even more integrity than the ones in this book. This book contained many holes, incomplete sentences and missing words, in it. He raised his head and looked up at the tree branches, trying to make some sense out of it all.

A little while later Huang Yaoshi turned the last page. “Who will recite first?” he asked.

Ouyang Ke thought, “This book is confusing and very difficult to memorize. I’d better recite it while it is still fresh



in my memory.” Snatching the opportunity he said, “I will.”

Huang Yaoshi nodded his head, then to Guo Jing he said, “Please go to the bamboo grove over there. You cannot listen to him reciting.”

Guo Jing obeyed him and walked a few dozen steps towards the bamboo grove. Huang Rong saw this as a good opportunity for them to escape together, so she quietly walked towards him. Huang Yaoshi suddenly called out, “Rong’er, come here! You have to listen to them recite, otherwise you’ll say I am one-sided.”

“You are one-sided,” Huang Rong replied, “You don’t need other people to say that.”

“That’s nonsense!” Huang Yaoshi laughed, “Come here!”

With her mouth Huang Rong silently said, “I don’t want to come,” but she knew her father’s temperament very well; once he’d decided to keep her under his watchful eyes, it would be even more difficult for her to escape. Slowly she walked back towards them, giving Ouyang Ke her sweetest smile and said, “Brother Ouyang, what’s so good about me that you like me so much?”

Ouyang Ke’s heart melted and his vision blurred. Grinning widely he replied, “Little sister, you ... you ...” he could say no more than that.

“Don’t go back to the West too soon,” Huang Rong added, “Stay on Peach Blossom Island for several days. The west is very cold, isn’t it?”

“The west is much bigger than you think. There are some cold regions, no doubt, but other parts are warm and sunny, much like the south (Jiangnan),” Ouyang Ke replied.

"I don't believe you," Huang Rong smiled, "You love to deceive people."

Ouyang Ke was about to debate with her, but Ouyang Feng coldly said, "Child, you can chat again later; right now you need to recite the book."

Ouyang Ke was startled; he realized that Huang Rong's conversation was intended to confuse him, and indeed he had now forgotten many characters from the confusing parts. He therefore refocused his attention and slowly recited the book. "The way of Heaven: A simple fix is not enough to repair damage; it truly is an empty victory, insufficient for a real one ..."

His memory was quite good; he managed to remember most of the theory in the front part, but towards the latter part of the book - where the training methods were explained, he missed a lot. It was not surprising actually, since Madame Huang did not know martial arts and it was some time later that she re-wrote the book from memory, so the words were unknowingly jumbled. Ouyang Ke only managed to recall about ten percent of this latter part. All the while Huang Rong kept trying to divert his attention by saying, "Not right! You remembered wrong!" He could not even remember ten percent towards the end of the book.

Huang Yaoshi smiled and said, "You remembered that much and that was very good!" Raising his voice he called out, "Nephew Guo, it's your turn to recite."

Guo Jing walked back and, seeing the smug expression on Ouyang Ke's face, he thought, "This man is really smart, he only read it once, yet he can still recite this mumbo-jumbo text. I don't have that capability, so I'd better recite the ones Big Brother Zhou taught me. If it is incorrect, oh well ... I don't have any choice."

Hong Qigong said, "Stupid kid, they intentionally want to make fools out of us; they planned it all."

Huang Rong suddenly kicked the ground and leaped to the top of the bamboo pavilion. With a flick of her hand she pointed a dagger at her own chest and said, "Father, if you insist on my going to the West with that stinky boy, I will die right here right now in your presence."

Huang Yaoshi knew his precious daughter would do what she said so he called out, "Put that dagger down! We can talk it over."

Ouyang Feng thrust his staff onto the ground and with a humming sound something flew from the staff straight towards Huang Rong. The hidden projectile was very fast; before Huang Rong could see what it was, she'd already heard a clanking sound and the dagger flew from her hand, falling to the ground. At the same time Huang Yaoshi leaped to the roof, stretched his hand, grabbed his daughter's shoulder and softly said, "It's all right if you don't want to get married. You can stay on Peach Blossom Island and accompany your father for the rest of your life."

Huang Rong flailed her arms and legs, crying, "Father, you don't love Rong'er! You don't love Rong'er!"

Hong Qigong was amused to see Huang Yaoshi, who roamed the lakes and the sea fearlessly, who killed people without batting an eye, was actually having trouble controlling his own daughter. He could not help laughing very hard.

Ouyang Feng thought, "I will wait for the final decision and then I'll take care of this Old Beggar and that boy surnamed Guo. We'll sort out the other things later. If this girl acts like a spoiled brat, what do I care?" Therefore he said, "Nephew Guo's martial arts skill is excellent; he is a real young hero.

His intelligence must be excellent as well. Brother Yao, you'd better ask him to recite."

"Exactly!" Huang Yaoshi said, "Rong'er, if you keep babbling you will disturb Nephew Guo's concentration." Huang Rong closed her mouth immediately.

Ouyang Feng wanted to humiliate Guo Jing very much. "Nephew Guo, please start reciting. We are going to listen respectfully," he urged.

Guo Jing's face reddened as he thought, "I can't do it; I'd better recite what Big Brother Zhou taught me." Thereupon he started reciting, "The way of Heaven: A simple fix is not enough to repair damage; it truly is an empty victory, insufficient for a real one ..." He had recited the 'Nine Yin Manual' from beginning to end hundreds of times before; by now it was deeply imbedded in his brain. He recited slowly but steadily with no hesitation at all.

About half a page later everybody was stunned and they thought, "This kid seems slow and dim-witted, who would have known that he is actually very smart."

Very soon Guo Jing had reached the fourth page. Hong Qigong and Huang Rong knew very well that Guo Jing did not have that kind of intelligence and they did not know what had possessed him, but they were extremely and pleasantly surprised.

Huang Yaoshi listened attentively and compared every word with the ones in the book. He discovered that Guo Jing's sentences were ten times more logical; firmly resembling the original text that he remembered. His heart turned cold and he unknowingly broke into a cold sweat. "Could it be that my deceased wife's spirit in the underworld is so smart that she managed to recall the full text and passed it on to this boy?" The words kept coming out of Guo Jing's mouth

like trickling water. Huang Yaoshi was beginning to be convinced that his wife's spirit was helping this youngster; he looked up to the sky and softly muttered, "A Heng, A Heng, you loved me so much that you have used this boy's mouth to impart the manual to me. But why don't you let me have a glimpse of you? I've played my flute every night for you; did you hear it?"

'A Heng' was Madame Huang's nickname and nobody else but him knew this; naturally no one else knew what he was talking about. They saw that his face looked different; his eyes were glazed with tears, his mouth quivered but nothing came out of it; they were puzzled.

After being in that dazed condition for a while Huang Yaoshi suddenly had another thought. He waved his hand to stop Guo Jing. His face was as cold as if there was a layer of frost on it; fiercely he asked, "The 'Nine Yin Manual' that Mei Chaofeng lost, where did you find it?"

Guo Jing saw his eyes had a murderous look and he was really frightened. "Disciple really does not know Mei ... Senior Mei's Manual's whereabouts. If I did, I will gladly help retrieve it and return it to the Island Master."

Huang Yaoshi looked at him with his penetrating gaze yet did not see even the slightest bit of deceitfulness on Guo Jing's face. He was compelled to believe it was his late wife from the underworld who'd taught Guo Jing; he felt joy and grief at the same time. With a loud and clear voice he gave his verdict, "Very well. Brother Qi, Brother Feng, it was my deceased wife who chose our son-in-law; your brother does not have anything else to say. Child, I betroth Rong'er to you. Treat her well. I have spoiled Rong'er badly, so you need to yield thirty percent of the time."

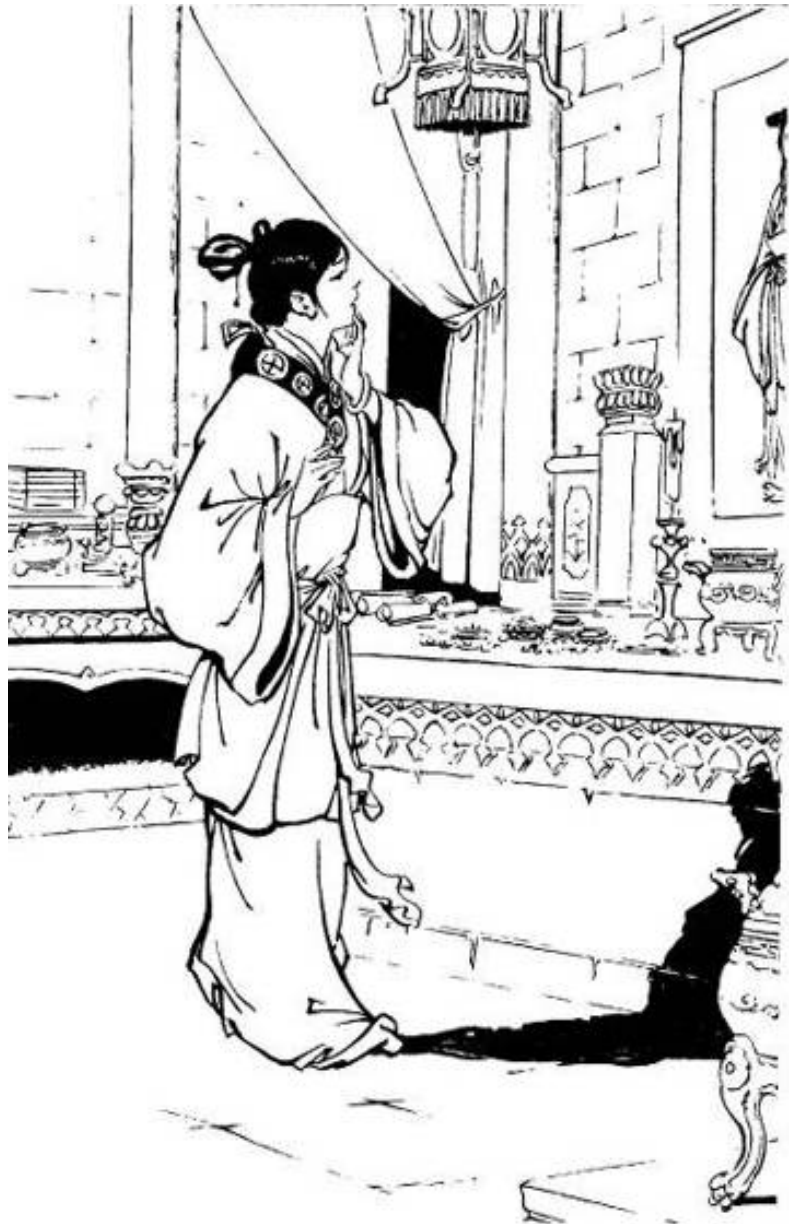
Huang Rong was ecstatic and she grinned from ear to ear, "I am a completely well-behaved girl; who said I am spoiled badly?"

Guo Jing might be stupid, he might be slow, but this time he did not need Huang Rong to prompt him; he immediately kneeled down and kowtowed, "Father-in-law!"

He had not yet stood back up when Ouyang Ke suddenly called out, "Hold on!"

## Chapter 19 - Great Waves, School of Sharks

Translated by Frans Soetomo



*Alone in that small underground room and seeing  
the painting of her deceased mother made by her*

*father's own hand; with a roller coaster of emotions Huang Rong thought, "I have never seen Mother. I wonder after I die, will I meet her? Was she really as beautiful as in the picture? Where is she right now? Is she in the sky above, in the earth below, or still in this room?"*

Not in his wildest dreams did Hong Qigong think the memorization contest would end up this way. Guo Jing beating Ouyang Ke and making him roll around on the ground seventeen or eighteen times would be ten times more believable to him. He was so happy that he could not wipe the smile off his face. Hearing Ouyang Ke protesting he snapped, "What? You are not convinced?"

"What Brother Guo recited was a lot more than what was written in the book," Ouyang Ke said, "He must have the 'Nine Yin Manual' in his possession. Junior has the courage to ask to search him."

"Island Master Huang had accepted his proposal," Hong Qigong said, "What other business is there to discuss? Didn't you hear what your uncle said before the tests?"

Ouyang Feng glared. "Do you think a man surnamed Ouyang would be easily deceived?" he said. He heard what his nephew just said and was convinced that Guo Jing knew the 'Nine Yin Manual'. He wanted very much to get the book for himself. Whether Huang Yaoshi accepted his marriage proposal or not became secondary to him.

Guo Jing took off his belt and opened up his clothing, saying, "Senior Ouyang, you can search me if you want to." He immediately took everything out of his pockets and placed them on top of a big rock nearby: silver coins, a handkerchief, a flint and the like.



“Humph!” Ouyang Feng snorted and began searching Guo Jing’s body. Huang Yaoshi had known Ouyang Feng as a ruthless man for a long time and he would do unpredictable things when angry. His strength was profound and if he put forth a violent hand, nobody would be able to rescue Guo Jing. Huang Yaoshi coughed, stretched out his left hand and placed it on Ouyang Ke’s neck close to his spine; it was a vital point. Should Huang Yaoshi put some force into it, Ouyang Ke’s spine would break and Ouyang Feng could give up any ideas of saving him.

Hong Qigong knew his intentions very well and he was fascinated, “Old Heretic Huang is really one-sided. Now that he gives favor to his daughter and future son-in-law he wants to protect this dumb disciple of mine. Ay! He was capable of reciting the whole book, so I can’t call him dumb anymore.”

Originally Ouyang Feng was going to strike Guo Jing’s lower abdomen with his ‘Toad Stance’ energy and let him suffer for three years before he finally died. Seeing that Huang Yaoshi had guarded against his scheme he did not dare to strike. He searched Guo Jing’s body without any results. All he could do was stay silent for a long time, thinking really hard. He did not believe all this nonsense about Madame Huang’s spirit choosing her son-in-law. He recalled that this kid was dumb, slow and apparently he could not lie. Perhaps he could coerce the whereabouts of the Manual from him. He shook the staff in his hand and with a scratching sound the two weird looking snakes slithered up the length of the staff.

Huang Rong and Guo Jing had seen these strange animals; they were frightened and moved back one step. Pointing at Guo Jing’s throat, he asked, “Nephew Guo, where did you learn the ‘Nine Yin Manual’?” His eyes were blazing red as he looked at Guo Jing with a penetrating glare.

"I know about the 'Nine Yin Manual', but I have never seen it," Guo Jing said. "The first volume is in the hands of Zhou Botong, Big Brother Zhou ..."

"Why did you call Zhou Botong 'Big Brother Zhou'?" Hong Qigong asked, "Have you met the Old Urchin Zhou Botong?"

"Yes," Guo Jing replied, "Big Brother Zhou and your disciple have become sworn brothers."

"One is old and the other young," Hong Qigong mocked, "That's really preposterous!"

"What about the second volume?" Ouyang Feng asked.

"The second volume was in Mei Chaofeng ... Mei ... Mei Shijie's hands, but it was lost at Lake Tai," Guo Jing explained. "Right now she is under Father-in-law's orders to search for it everywhere. Disciple was thinking that after everything is done here, I will go and lend her a helping hand."

Ouyang Feng asked fiercely, "If you have not seen the 'Nine Yin Manual', how can you recite it so well?"

Guo Jing was puzzled. "Did I recite the 'Nine Yin Manual'?" he asked, "That can't be. I recited a text Big Brother Zhou taught me; he said it was his own secret martial arts creation."

Huang Yaoshi inwardly sighed. He was dismayed and thought, "Zhou Botong received his late martial brother's order to guard the 'Nine Yin Manual'. We played with marbles and he lost to me; I tricked him and in the end he burned the book. Up to that time he had not looked at the contents of the book at all, which was not at all strange. But now there seems to be some divine intervention; everything

has happened so coincidentally that my daughter ended up betrothed to him. Isn't he very lucky?"

Huang Yaoshi was still deep in thought as Ouyang Feng pressed on, "Where is Zhou Botong now?" he asked.

Guo Jing was about to answer when Huang Yaoshi cut him off, "Jing'er, there's no need to say more." Turning his head to Ouyang Feng he said, "It is such a trivial matter, why do you care so much? Brother Feng, Brother Qi, we have not seen each other for twenty years. Let us spend three days together on Peach Blossom Island, drinking to our hearts' content."

"Shifu, I am going to prepare some food for you," Huang Rong said, "The lotuses on this island are superb; so how about some chicken steamed in lotus petals, or some fresh water chestnut and lotus leaf soup? I am sure you'll like it."

Hong Qigong smiled widely, "Now that you've gotten your heart's desire, look how happy you are!"

Huang Rong just gave him a faint smile. "Shifu, Uncle Ouyang, Brother Ouyang, please," she said. She was extremely happy to be betrothed to Guo Jing so that her animosity toward Ouyang Ke had vanished into thin air. At this very moment everybody in the whole wide world was, to her, a good person.

Ouyang Feng raised his hands in respect to Huang Yaoshi, "Brother Yao, I must decline your great hospitality. Many thanks. Let us part today."

"Brother Feng has come a long way," Huang Yaoshi replied, "Brother has not fulfilled my responsibility as a good host; how can I let you leave?"

Ouyang Feng had come from thousands of li away, not only for his nephew's sake, but for another grand scheme as well. He'd received his nephew's carrier pigeon message which said that the 'Nine Yin Manual' had reappeared and was in the hands of Huang Yaoshi's renegade blind female disciple. After the wedding he planned to join forces with Huang Yaoshi and obtain the 'Nine Yin Manual'. But now the marriage proposal failed; his nephew lost the competition and he felt really dejected, so he insisted on leaving.

"Uncle!" Ouyang Ke suddenly said, "Your nephew is useless and I have made you lose face. But Uncle Huang has promised that he will teach Nephew some skills."

"Humph!" Ouyang Feng muttered. He was aware his nephew had not given up hope on the Huang family's girl, so he'd found some excuse to stay longer to be close to Huang Rong and try to win her heart. Who knows, she might eventually fall into his hands?

Huang Yaoshi was upset. He erroneously thought that Ouyang Ke would win the three tests and that was why he made that promise to reward Guo Jing. But it was Ouyang Ke who unexpectedly failed the tests. Apologetically he said, "Nephew Ouyang, your uncle's martial arts are unparalleled in the world; others cannot hold a candle to him. You have mastered your own family heritage skills, what need do you have to learn somebody else's? This old dog was lucky to master some 'back door second rate' [zuo dao pang men] techniques. If Nephew does not think it too superficial, then whichever skill you'd like to learn, this old dog will be happy to teach it to you."

Ouyang Ke thought, "I must choose the one that needs the longest time to master. I have long heard about Peach Blossom Island's 'Five Elements Open Gateway' [wu xing qi

men] as being number one in the world. I am sure he won't be finished in a day." Thereupon he bowed and said, "Young Nephew admires your 'wu xing qi men' techniques so much. I am asking Uncle to kindly bestow that on me."

Huang Yaoshi did not answer immediately; he hesitated with an awkward feeling in his heart. The technique requested was the one he was most proud of. Apart from it being complicated to begin with, he had expanded and developed new interpretations and variations of the original technique he learned from his ancestors. His own daughter, because of her young age, had not learned this technique so how could he pass this knowledge to a total stranger? But he had given his promise and it was impossible to take back, so reluctantly he asked, "The 'wu xing qi men' technique is very broad and deep. Which one do you want to learn?"

Ouyang Ke wanted to stay on Peach Blossom Island as long as possible, so he requested, "Young Nephew saw the winding pathways of Peach Blossom Island; the vegetation arrangement is very complicated. My heart admires this arrangement to no end. I am asking Uncle to allow young nephew to stay on the island for several months and thoroughly study the mystery of these complicated pathways and their variations."

Huang Yaoshi's face changed slightly and he cast a glance towards Ouyang Feng. He thought, "So you want to investigate and find out about Peach Blossom Island's ingenious arrangements. What is your real intention?"

Ouyang Feng saw his expression and could guess what was in his heart, so he chided his nephew, "You don't know how high the heavens are or how deep the earth is! Uncle Huang has spent half of his life painstakingly arranging the

island. It is his defense against intruders; how could he divulge this mystery to you?"

Huang Yaoshi laughed coldly, "Peach Blossom Island is only a barren and rocky hill; I doubt if anybody would come and harm me."

Ouyang Feng smiled apologetically, "Little Brother rudely made an indiscreet remark, Brother Yao, please don't be offended."

Hong Qigong laughed, "Old Poison! You are very sly; this is what you planned from the start. Quite brilliant!" he mocked.

Huang Yaoshi slipped the jade flute into his belt and said, "Everyone, please follow me."

Ouyang Ke saw the indignation on his face, so he looked to his uncle for guidance. Ouyang Feng nodded his head and started to walk behind Huang Yaoshi. Everybody followed not too far behind.

Winding through the bamboo grove they arrived at a big lotus pond. The lotuses were white, emitting a fragrant scent. The pond's surface was covered with lotus leaves and there was a strip of causeway made of small stones winding through the center of it. Huang Yaoshi walked along the causeway leading everyone to a building on the other side of the pond. The building was made from pine logs and a rattan tree climbed the outside wall. It was midsummer and the weather was hot, but as soon as they saw that building everyone felt a burst of cool air. Huang Yaoshi led the four people into his study. A deaf and mute servant immediately came and served tea. The tea was dark green and as cold as snow. As soon as it entered their mouths the cold seeped into their bones.

Hong Qigong laughed and made a comment, "People say: 'after being a beggar for three years one would not be willing to be a government official'. Brother Yao, if I stayed in your cool place for three years, I wouldn't be willing to be a beggar any longer!"

"If Brother Qi is willing to stay to drink and talk to our hearts' content, that would truly be my wish come true," Huang Yaoshi said.

Hong Qigong could hear the sincerity in his voice and his heart was touched. "Many thanks," he said, "It's a pity the Old Beggar leads a busy and laborious life; I don't have the luxury of enjoying a peaceful life like Brother Yao."

Ouyang Feng said, "With the two of you living in the same place, as long as you don't fight each other, I'll bet within two months you will have created several sets of fist techniques or sword stances."

Hong Qigong laughed, "Are you jealous?"

"This room is a big hall for studying martial arts," Ouyang Feng explained, "It's natural that I would come to that conclusion."

Hong Qigong laughed, "Ha ... ha ...! It's another one of those, 'what-you-say-is-not-what-you-were-thinking' sort of speech."

Although these two men did not hold deep animosity towards each other, their minds were worlds apart and that was why they did not like each other. Ouyang Feng's feelings were hidden behind a thick wall, unlike Hong Qigong who was open and outspoken. When Ouyang Feng heard Hong Qigong's comment he wanted to send Hong Qigong to the grave with one strike...but his face did not show it. He laughed but did not say anything.

Huang Yaoshi pressed something on the side of the table and a landscape painting on the west wall slowly rose, revealing a secret compartment behind it. He walked towards the wall, opened up the door to the compartment and took out a roll of paper. He gently ran his fingers on the scroll several times before he faced Ouyang Ke and said, "This is the map of Peach Blossom Island, complete with all the five elements variations, the yin and yang elements and the eight-trigram changes; everything is there. Take this and study it thoroughly."

Ouyang Ke was disappointed; he was hoping he could stay on Peach Blossom Island for a while. He did not expect that Huang Yaoshi would only give him a map to look at. He knew it would be a difficult topic to learn; since he did not have a choice, he bowed respectfully and stepped forward to take the scroll from his hand.

"Hold on!" Huang Yaoshi suddenly said. Ouyang Ke was startled, he pulled his hand back. "When you take this drawing, I want you to go to Lin'an and find an inn or a temple to stay in. After three months I will send someone to retrieve it. You can memorize everything on the map; but I forbid you to make any copies," Huang Yaoshi continued.

Ouyang Ke thought, "You won't allow me to stay on Peach Blossom Island; it's just as well since I don't care much about your weird skills anyway. For the next three months I will be responsible for this chart. If I'm not careful I might lose or damage it; then what would I do? No, I'd better not take it!" He was going to say some nice words to decline the offer when suddenly another thought came into his mind, "He said he is going to send someone to retrieve it; that someone must be his daughter. That will be a great opportunity to get intimate with her." He was delighted with this thought and immediately held out his hand to receive the scroll while uttering some grateful words.



Huang Rong took the small box with the dragon pill and gave it back to Ouyang Feng. "Uncle Ouyang," she said, "This is your poison antidote pill; your niece does not dare to accept it."

Ouyang Feng thought, "If this thing fell into the Old Heretic Huang's hands, he will be impervious to my poisons. Although taking it back again seems so petty, I can't afford to let him have it." Therefore, he held out his hand to take the pill and immediately raised his hands to say goodbye to Huang Yaoshi.

Huang Yaoshi did not hold him back and sent them on their way. Walking to the door Hong Qigong said, "Poison Brother [Du Xiong], our Sword Meet on Mount Hua is at the end of next. You have to conserve your energy well since we are going to have a very tight competition."

Ouyang Feng simply smiled casually, "The way I see it, we needn't waste our energy fighting. The title 'the world's number one martial artist' has already been decided."

Hong Qigong was taken aback, "Already been decided? Could it be that Du Xiong has mastered a matchless and unique skill?"

Ouyang Feng showed a faint smile, "With such mediocre skills, how would Ouyang Feng dare to covet the title 'the world's number one martial artist'? I am talking about the person who taught our Nephew Guo."

Hong Qigong laughed, "Are you talking about the Old Beggar?" he said, "I'd like that, but Brother Yao's martial arts improve daily. For you, Poison Brother, advancing years also mean advancing skills. I am afraid Emperor Duan's martial arts skill is not getting weaker either. I don't think the Old Beggar will have any advantage."

Ouyang Feng coldly said, "Of the people who taught Nephew Guo, it's not necessarily Brother Qi's martial arts that were the finest."

"What?" Hong Qigong had barely closed his mouth when Huang Yaoshi interrupted, "Uh, are you talking about the Old Urchin Zhou Botong?"

"That's right!" Ouyang Feng replied, "Since the Old Urchin has mastered the 'Nine Yin Manual', then all of us: the Eastern Heretic, Western Poison, Southern Emperor and Northern Beggar, are no longer his match."

"That is not necessarily true," Huang Yaoshi said, "A manual is dead, but martial arts are alive."

Ouyang Feng noticed earlier that Huang Yaoshi had diverted his question and he did not let Guo Jing tell them Zhou Botong's whereabouts. He knew something was amiss; so he decided to mention it again just before he left. Hearing what Huang Yaoshi said, he knew his suspicions were not unsubstantiated; but he was crafty, so his face did not show any change. Nonchalantly he said, "We all know the quality of the Quanzhen Sect's martial arts; we even need to ask for their advice. Now that the Old Urchin has added the skills of the 'Nine Yin Manual' to that, even if Wang Chongyang were alive, I doubt even he would be his match, no need to mention us. Ay! The Quanzhen are very good; even if the three of us worked hard for a lifetime, we are still a notch below them."

"The Old Urchin's martial arts are a lot better than mine," Huang Yaoshi said, "But it has not reached Brother Feng or Brother Qi's level. I know this for a fact."

"Brother Yao does not need to be modest," Ouyang Feng said, "You and I are 'ban jin ba liang' [lit. half a 'jin' to eight 'liang' = comparable or equal]. You have said yourself that

Zhou Botong's martial arts are not as good as yours. However, I am afraid ..." He shook his head.

"Brother Feng will find out next year at the Sword Meet on Mount Hua," Huang Yaoshi smiled.

Ouyang Feng was serious, "Brother Yao, I usually respect your martial arts, but I doubted it when you said you can defeat the Old Urchin. When it comes to him, you'd better watch out."

It was not that Huang Yaoshi did not know that he was being provoked, but he was a proud man, so of course he did not want anyone to belittle him. Seething with indignation he said, "The Old Urchin is actually on Peach Blossom Island. Brother has imprisoned him here for fifteen years."

Ouyang Feng and Hong Qigong were dumbstruck. Hong Qigong simply raised his eyebrows, but Ouyang Feng actually broke out laughing, "Brother Yao...that is a very good joke!"

Huang Yaoshi did not say anything but pointed his finger as if showing the way; then he exerted strength to his feet and flew back to the bamboo grove. Hong Qigong followed with his left hand holding Guo Jing's arm, his right hand Huang Rong's. Ouyang Feng took Ouyang Ke's arm and together they used their lightness kungfu. Not too long afterwards they arrived in front of Zhou Botong's cave.

When they were still quite a distance away Huang Yaoshi noticed that the cave was empty. "Ah!" he uttered in surprise. With his body as light as a feather, he leaped up into the sky and after several jumps he arrived at the cave's mouth. His left foot landed first, only to feel as if he'd stepped on an empty space. Even encountering this situation suddenly, he did not panic; he kicked his right foot

into the air and jumped vertically. Again he landed gently with his left foot, but again felt he was stepping onto empty air. This time he was not able to use anything as a stepping stone, so with the backward flick of his hand he pulled the jade flute from his belt and in one fluid motion struck the cave wall with the flute. With one push his body flew out of the cave like an arrow.

That vertical leap, pulling out the jade flute and flying backwards outside of the cave was done in a flash. Hong Qigong and Ouyang Feng, seeing his wonderful skill, cheered...only to hear a “Splotch!” sound. Huang Yaoshi’s feet had landed in a hole in the ground outside the cave.

Huang Yaoshi felt his feet stepping on something wet and soft. With a light kick once again his body flew up. While he was still in the air he saw Hong Qigong and the rest had arrived and they did not fall into any traps. He landed gently at his daughter’s side. Suddenly a foul stench attacked his nostrils; he looked down and, to his dismay, he saw his feet were covered with faeces.

Everyone was puzzled. With his high level of martial arts skill, plus his intelligence, how could Huang Yaoshi fall into someone’s trap?

Huang Yaoshi was furious; he took a tree branch to test the ground, poking to the east and striking to the west. To his surprise, only those three holes were there, the rest was solid ground.

Obviously Zhou Botong had expected him to come rushing into the cave, so he’d prepared the first hole. He had carefully calculated that with his level of lightness kungfu Huang Yaoshi would leap up vertically to avoid falling into that hole; therefore, he prepared the second hole. Again, he knew that this second hole would not trap Huang Yaoshi. So

he cleverly placed the third hole, knowing Huang Yaoshi would leap backwards out of the cave, and filled this hole with faeces.

Huang Yaoshi carefully entered the cave, looked in all directions, and saw nothing except some clay jars and clay bowls. He vaguely noticed several lines of characters written on the cave wall.

Watching Huang Yaoshi fall into a trap, Ouyang Feng laughed inside. But now he saw Huang Yaoshi walking towards the cave wall to take a look; he thought there was a slight possibility that the 'Nine Yin Manual' was written on that wall, so he threw caution to the wind and hurriedly went forward to take a closer look. What he saw was several characters carved with a needle which read, "Old Heretic Huang, you have broken both of my legs and imprisoned me inside this cave for fifteen years. I should have broken both of your legs to vent my anger. But after some thought I decided to let it pass. I give you this pile of faeces and a pot of stinky urine instead. Please, please ..." The characters below the 'please' were covered by a leaf.

Huang Yaoshi casually stretched his hand to lift the leaf up, but the leaf was tied to a string. Without thinking he pulled the string only to hear a knocking noise above him. Realizing what was happening Huang Yaoshi quickly jumped to the left. Right next to him Ouyang Feng was also quick; seeing Huang Yaoshi move, he jumped to the right. Who would have thought that following a series of clanking sounds, a bunch of clay jars fell from both sides? Both men were drenched in smelly urine!

Hong Qigong burst out in laughter, "How sweet! How sweet!" he shouted. Huang Yaoshi was fuming mad and shouted some curse words. Ouyang Feng was very good at concealing his feelings, so he merely smiled.

Huang Rong dashed back to the house and brought a change of clothes for her father. She also brought one of her father's robes for Ouyang Feng.

Huang Yaoshi decided to look inside the cave one more time, being very careful not to trip on any more booby-traps. He took down the leaf and saw two lines of very fine characters, "... don't pull the leaf. There is smelly urine above to drench you. This is the absolute, one hundred percent, truth! Don't ever say that I didn't warn you."

Huang Yaoshi was angry, but also amused. Suddenly he remembered that the urine was still a little bit warm; he turned and walked out the cave. "The Old Urchin did not leave too long ago; we can still catch up with him."

Guo Jing was wary, "As soon as those two see each other they will certainly engage in a fierce battle," he thought. But before he had a chance to voice his opinion Huang Yaoshi had already flown to the east.

Everybody knew the pathways of the island were mysterious and nobody dared to be left behind; so they followed closely. Not too far ahead they could see Zhou Botong leisurely strolling along. Huang Yaoshi exerted his strength to his feet and flew like an arrow leaving its bow and in a flash he approached Zhou Botong. He stretched out his hand to grab Zhou Botong's neck.

Zhou Botong evaded to the left. Turning his body around, he called out, "Wow! It's the sweet smelling Old Heretic Huang!"

In this one grab Huang Yaoshi had used the skill he'd painstakingly trained for decades; it was swift and fierce. He was angry because of the urine and dung, so he'd used one hundred percent of his strength in that one attack. Who would have thought that Zhou Botong was able to evade his

attack casually, as though it took not too much effort at all. Huang Yaoshi's heart turned cold and he stopped his attack. He calmed himself and looked at Zhou Botong. To his surprise Zhou Botong's hands were tied in front of his chest; but he was smiling happily and his face showed contentment.

Guo Jing rushed forward and said, "Big Brother, Island Master Huang has become my father-in-law; now we belong to the same family."

Zhou Botong sighed, "What Father-in-law? Why didn't you listen to me? Old Heretic Huang is wicked and weird; how can his daughter be any better? You will suffer the consequences for the rest of your life. Good Brother, let me tell you this: No matter what happens, you cannot take as your wife the daughter of someone who loves to drench himself in urine everyday. It's a good thing you haven't yet bowed to heaven and the earth to marry her; you can still slip away. Quickly, run away as far as you can, otherwise she'll come looking for you ..."

He was still babbling when Huang Rong stepped forward and smiled, "Big Brother Zhou, look who's coming behind you?"

Zhou Botong turned his head, but of course he did not see anyone. Huang Rong raised her father's smelly clothes and threw them towards his back. Zhou Botong heard the swishing sound and stepped sideways. "Splat!" the bundle of clothes fell to the ground dispersing its foul odor everywhere.

Zhou Botong doubled up with laughter. "Old Heretic Huang," he said, "Even though you imprisoned me for fifteen years and broke both of my legs, I only let you to

step in my faeces and drenched you with my urine. Don't you think that is a fair trade?"

Huang Yaoshi pondered for a moment and felt Zhou Botong was right. He did not give it another thought and asked, "Why did you tie up your hands like that?"

"I have my reasons, which I can't tell you," Zhou Botong said, repeatedly shaking his head and looking solemn.

Actually when Zhou Botong was forced to endure suffering in that hole, he thought several times of coming out and fighting Huang Yaoshi. However, he realized that he was still not Huang Yaoshi's match. Besides, if he got killed or heavily injured, who would defend the 'Nine Yin Manual' entrusted to him by his martial brother? Therefore, he had to swallow his pride and endure everything patiently. Then Guo Jing came onto the scene. Together they played four-hand mutual combat until one day he had the idea of fighting as two Zhou Botongs against one Huang Yaoshi. He was confident that no matter how high Huang Yaoshi's skills were, he would be able to exact revenge for his fifteen years of suffering.

After Guo Jing left, he sat on the ground and all kinds of memories came flooding back to his mind: dozens of years of gratitude, grudges, love and hate came until he felt like a thick curtain was covering his mind. Suddenly he heard from the distance the flute, zither and whistle sounds battling each other. His spirits were stirred; he became agitated, wanted to dash out, and had difficulty controlling his emotions. He had been pondering his own set of questions for a while, "My little brother's martial arts are still far below mine, but why is it that Old Heretic Huang's flute sound did not affect him at all?" After he'd befriended Guo Jing for many days he started to understand Guo Jing's personality. That day, after thinking deeply for a while, it



suddenly dawned on him; "That's right! That's right!" he exclaimed, "He is young, does not understand the relationship between a man and a woman and does not know its pleasures and heartaches. Moreover, he is simple-minded, not ambitious, has a naïve personality and a pure heart. I, on the other hand, am old; but why do I still think about revenge? I am so narrow-minded. It really is ridiculous!"

Although he belonged to the Quanzhen Sect, he had never become a Taoist Priest; still, the Taoist principles were deeply ingrained in his heart: 'peace and tranquility' [qing jing wu wei], lead a simple life and suppress ambition, all those Taoist teachings. It was like a light bulb suddenly turned on in his head. He let out a long breath, stood up and walked outside of the cave. For the first time in many years he realized that the sky was so blue and the clouds so white. His heart became clear and bright. The suffering he experienced from Huang Yaoshi for the past fifteen years simply became a small matter in his mind.

Once outside he thought aloud, "Once I leave Peach Blossom Island I am not coming back. But if I don't leave some souvenirs for the Old Heretic Huang, how will he remember me in the days to come?" Therefore, with much eagerness, he dug some holes and filled them with his faeces and found some jars and filled them with his urine. After working hard for half a day he finally left the cave.

He'd only walked several steps when he suddenly remembered something, "The pathways of Peach Blossom Island are strange, so how will I know the right path to take? If I leave Brother Guo on this island, chances are that more harm will come his way; I must take him with me. If the Old Heretic Huang tries to stop, ha ... ha ..., should the Old Heretic Huang want to fight, one Old Heretic Huang won't be a match for two Old Urchins!" After thinking about

that he casually swung his hand and ‘Crack!’ a small tree by the pathway broke in two. He was stunned! “How come I am so strong? This has nothing to do with the ‘Mutual Hands Combat’ technique.”

He swung his hand several more times and ‘Crack! Crack! Crack!’ without too much effort he broke seven or eight small trees along the way. He was horrified. “This ... this is the energy cultivation from the ‘Nine Yin Manual’. I ... when...when did I learn it?” All of a sudden his body was drenched in a cold sweat. “Strange, really strange!” he muttered.

He clearly remembered his late martial brother’s death wish; that no one from Quanzhen was allowed to learn anything from the manual. He hadn’t thought that in order to teach Guo Jing he had to recite the text to him everyday and used his hands to provide a clearer explanation; unexpectedly, the manual had become ingrained in his mind. Even in his sleep he would dream about the manual, so he subconsciously cultivated his energy based on the text. Since his martial arts were already high, his understanding of martial arts theory was also profound. Because the ‘Nine Yin Manual’ was based on Taoist principles which he had already learned, the manual became intertwined with his own basic knowledge. He did not wish to learn these martial arts, but it came to him anyway.

He vented his frustration by shouting loudly, “Bad! It’s really bad! This is called ‘once the ghost inhabits your body, you cannot drive it out’. I wanted to play a big joke on Brother Guo, but who knew that by smashing a big rock, the debris would hurt your own foot.”

He was depressed for a long while and kept knocking his head. Afterwards an idea came into his mind; he peeled off

some tree bark, made a rope, then with his teeth he tied his own hands while muttering loudly, "From now on, since I cannot forget the manual completely, I must not resort to violence towards anyone. Even if the Old Heretic Huang chases me, I cannot fight him and therefore disobey my martial brother's death wish. Ay, Old Urchin, Old Urchin, you reap what you sow!"

Of course Huang Yaoshi could not guess the reason. He only knew the Old Urchin was naughty and strange, so he simply said, "Old Urchin, this is Brother Ouyang, who I believe you have met, this is ..." Before he could finish, Zhou Botong had walked around them all, sniffing here and there, and then he laughed, "This must be the Old Beggar Hong Qigong. I know he is a good man. 'Heaven's nets do not miss'! My stinky urine only drenched two people, the Eastern Heretic and the Western Poison. Ouyang Feng, you fought with me once and now I've soaked you with my urine; we are even now and nobody suffers a loss."

Ouyang Feng merely smiled but did not say anything. He came close to Huang Yaoshi and whispered in his ear, "Brother Yao, this man's martial arts are amazing; he's already surpassed both you and me. I think it best not to provoke him."

Huang Yaoshi thought, "We haven't seen each other for twenty years, how would you know my martial arts are inferior to his?" To Zhou Botong he said, "Botong, I have asked you over and over to let me burn the 'Nine Yin Manual' as a sacrifice in front of my late wife's memorial. As soon as you hand it to me, I am going to let you go. Where did you think you were going just now?"

"I am tired of living on this island," Zhou Botong said, "I am going outside to take a stroll."

"And where is the manual?" Huang Yaoshi said holding out his hand.

"I gave that to you earlier," Zhou Botong said.

"Don't talk nonsense," Huang Yaoshi said, "When did you give it to me?"

Zhou Botong smiled, "Guo Jing is your son-in-law, is he not? Then he belongs to you, does he not? I have passed on the 'Nine Yin Manual' from beginning to end to him; isn't that the same as giving the manual to you?"

Guo Jing was surprised. Panic stricken he called out, "Big Brother, this ... this ... you taught me the 'Nine Yin Manual'?"

Zhou Botong burst out laughing, "Do you think it was a fake?"

Guo Jing was dumbstruck and he felt like a fool. Zhou Botong was so happy. It was exactly for this moment that he was willing to expend immense efforts to get Guo Jing to memorize the 'Nine Yin Manual'; he wanted to see Guo Jing's expression when he found out that he'd learned the 'Nine Yin Manual' in spite of his earlier refusal. Now that this goal was achieved, how could Zhou Botong be not as happy as he was crazy?

"The first volume was always in your hands, but where did you get the second volume?" Huang Yaoshi asked.

"Didn't your good son-in-law deliver it to me personally?" Zhou Botong smiled mischievously.

"I ... I did not!" Guo Jing was taken aback.

Huang Yaoshi was very indignant and thought, "This kid Guo Jing dares to deceive me and poor blind Mei Chaofeng

is still desperately looking for that book.” He shot an angry glare towards Guo Jing, then turned his head towards Zhou Botong, “I want the original manual.”

“Brother,” Zhou Botong called Guo Jing, “Help me take the book from my pocket.” Guo Jing stepped forward and groping inside Zhou Botong’s pocket he took out a book about half an inch thick. Zhou Botong held out his hand to receive the book and said to Huang Yaoshi, “This is the first volume of the manual; the second volume is folded inside it. If you have the skill, come and take it.”

“What kind of skill are you talking about?” Huang Yaoshi asked.

Zhou Botong held the book tightly in his hands, bent his head and said “Wait, let me think ...” Quite a while later he smiled and said, “Pasting skill!”

“What?” Huang Yaoshi was puzzled.

Zhou Botong lifted his hands high in the air, and soon the book became a million pieces. A flurry of paper pieces flew from his hands like a flock of butterflies flying in all directions, carried by the sea breeze, floating to the east and scattering to the west. It would be impossible to track them down.

Huang Yaoshi was startled, angry and at the same time, surprised that Zhou’s internal energy was so profound. In that short period of time the book was completely gone. Remembering his late wife, Huang Yaoshi felt a stab of pain in his heart. “Old Urchin, you played a trick on me! Don’t ever think of leaving this island alive!” he shouted angrily. Flying forward his palm got very close to Zhou Botong’s face.

Zhou Botong moved his body just a little bit and like a pendulum he swung to the left and to the right. With a swish, swish sound Huang Yaoshi's palms danced in the air, very close to Zhou Botong's body, but were not able to touch him. It was Huang Yaoshi's specialty, the 'Peach Blossom Divine Sword Palm' [tao hua shen jian zhang]; who would have guessed that after about twenty stances, it seemed the palm technique was useless against Zhou Botong.

Huang Yaoshi was puzzled because Zhou Botong did not launch any counterattacks, while he had used all of his strength compelling Zhou Botong to withstand his attack. He was suddenly alarmed, "How could I, Huang Yaoshi, fight someone who has both his hands tied?"

Leaping back three steps he called out, "Old Urchin, I have done something inappropriate to you, but your legs have healed. Quickly break the rope binding your hands and let me fight your 'Nine Yin Manual' martial arts."

Zhou Botong looked dismayed and repeatedly he shook his head, "I don't want to lie to you, but I have my own difficulties. No matter what happens, I can't take off the ropes."

"Then let me take it off for you," Huang Yaoshi said, immediately moving forward to touch his hands.

"Aiyo! Help! Somebody help me!" Zhou Botong cried out and rolled around on the ground.

Guo Jing was shocked. "Father-in-law!" he called out. He was about to dash forward to block Huang Yaoshi when Hong Qigong held him back. "Don't act foolishly!" he hissed. Guo Jing halted and watched. Even though Zhou Botong was rolling around on the ground, he was very agile. Huang

Yaoshi grabbed and kicked but was unable to even touch his body.

“Look closely at how his body moves,” Hong Qigong whispered.

Only then did Guo Jing realize that Zhou Botong was moving according to the ‘Snake Slithers, the Wild Cat Flips’ [she xing li fan] from the ‘Nine Yin Manual’. He watched with a rapt attention. Every time he saw an exquisite move he would cheer, “Good!”

Huang Yaoshi was getting angrier; his hands flew everywhere, resembling a hatchet or a knife hacking in every direction. Zhou Botong’s long sleeve and part of his robe had been slashed by the strength of Huang Yaoshi’s hand. A moment later his long beard and long hair were also cut. Although he was not injured, Zhou Botong knew that if the fight was prolonged he might not stay so lucky. In perhaps half a move later he would be dead or at least heavily injured.

At that moment Huang Yaoshi’s left hand swept horizontally, while his right hand slashed down diagonally and each palm contained three deadly variations within. Zhou Botong knew that no matter how quickly he could move, it would be difficult to avoid this attack. He had no other choice but to exert his strength in both hands and break the rope. As soon as his hands were free, his left hand parried the attack, while his right hand went to his own back and scratched, “Aiyo! The itch is unbearable,” he said.

Huang Yaoshi was inwardly alarmed when he saw Zhou Botong acting so casually, even to the point of playfulness, while they were fighting ferociously. Huang Yaoshi sent out three more fierce stances and all three were his best ones.

"I can't fight you with one hand," Zhou Botong said, "Ay! I can't help it. No matter what, I can't let my martial brother down." He put all his strength into his right hand and parried the attack; while his left hand hung loosely at his side. His strength was still inferior to Huang Yaoshi's pure internal energy, so as soon as the two hands collided, Zhou Botong was shaken and he staggered back a few steps.

Huang Yaoshi flew forward with both palms surrounding Zhou Botong's body. "Use both hands! With one hand you are not my match," he called out.

"I can't," Zhou Botong said, "I have to use only one hand."

Huang Yaoshi was indignant, "All right then, try this!" Both of his palms struck forward with full strength. A loud bang was heard and Zhou Botong fell down to the ground. He sat still with both eyes closed. Huang Yaoshi withheld his hands and saw Zhou Botong coughing and spurting blood from his mouth; his face was paper-white.

Everyone thought it was strange; had he really fought with Huang Yaoshi, even if he couldn't win, he certainly wouldn't have suffered so badly. Why did he insist on using only one hand?

Zhou Botong stood up slowly and said, "The Old Urchin has suffered the consequences of his own actions. Even though I had no intention to, I unexpectedly learned the martial arts from the 'Nine Yin Manual' and I violated my martial brother's death wish. If I used both of my hands, Old Heretic Huang, you are not my match."

Huang Yaoshi was aware that what he said was the truth; he was silent. He realized he had no reason to imprison Zhou Botong on the island for fifteen years and he also had no reason to injure him just now. He took a jade box from his pocket, opened it and produced three blood-red pills; he



gave the pills to Zhou Botong and said, "Botong, there is no medicine under the heavens that can surpass these Peach Blossom Island red pills. Take one right now and then take the next two seven days apart and your internal injury won't be a problem any longer. Let me take you away from this island."

Zhou Botong nodded, took the pills and swallowed one; after circulating his breath for a while he vomited some congealed blood. He said, "Old Heretic Huang, your red pill is very effective; no wonder you are called 'Yaoshi' [master pharmacist]. Eek! Strange! Very strange! My name is 'Botong', I wonder what that means?" After pondering that question for a while he shook his head and said, "Old Heretic Huang, I must go now. Are you or aren't you going to let me go?"

"I do not dare stop you," Huang Yaoshi replied, "It's up to you if you stay or go. Brother Botong, from today, if you ever have the desire to come here, I will welcome you wholeheartedly. Now let me walk you to the boat which will take you back to the mainland."

Guo Jing squatted to pick up Zhou Botong and carried him on his back as he followed Huang Yaoshi and walked to the seashore. Arriving at the dock he saw six or seven boats, both large and small.

"Brother Yao," Ouyang Feng said, "You needn't send a boat to take Big Brother Zhou home. He can ride on Little Brother's boat."

"In that case do as Brother Feng desires," Huang Yaoshi said. He made a hand signal to a deaf and mute servant and that servant went onto a big boat nearby. When he reappeared he had a tray full of gold coins.

“Botong,” Huang Yaoshi said, “Take this money and use it to play around. Your martial arts are better than Old Heretic Huang’s. I admire you very much.”

Zhou Botong’s eyes shone with a mischievous twinkle. He looked towards Ouyang Feng’s big boat and saw a white flag on the bow. On the flag was embroidered a strange looking snake with two heads and both mouths were open showing forked tongues. He was not happy at all.

Ouyang Feng took a wooden whistle from his pocket and blew some notes; before long there came strange noises from the forest ahead. Two Peach Blossom Island servants came leading some White Camel Mountain snake herders out from the forest, followed by row after row of snakes which slithered onto the gangplank and went into the boat’s hold.

“I am not riding on Western Poison’s boat!” Zhou Botong cried out, “I’m scared of snakes!”

Huang Yaoshi smiled faintly, “That is all right too; you can ride on that boat.” He pointed to a boat nearby.

Zhou Botong shook his head no, “I don’t want that boat, I want that BIG boat.”

Huang Yaoshi’s face changed a little. “Botong, that ship is damaged, it is not fixed yet. You can’t have it.”

Everybody could see that the boat’s stern was tall and the hull was painted blue and gold; it was very beautiful. It looked new and strong, why did he say it was damaged?

“Why can’t I ride on that boat?” Zhou Botong asked, “Old Heretic Huang, how come you are so stingy?”

“That is a most ill-fated boat, that’s why it is always anchored here,” Huang Yaoshi explained. “Since when have

I been stingy? If you don't believe me, I'll have the boat burned for you to see." After making some hand signals, four deaf and mute servants lighted some torches and rushed to the boat to burn it.

Zhou Botong suddenly sat on the ground, flailing his hands and feet, pulling his hair and beard and bawling loudly. Seeing him acting like that startled every one. Guo Jing was the only one who really knew his temperament so he was just fascinated. Zhou Botong pulled his beard and rolled around on the ground, "I want to ride on the new boat; I want to ride the new boat." Huang Rong quickly moved forward to stop the four servants.

Hong Qigong smiled, "Brother Yao," he said, "For all of my life the Old Beggar has been ill-fated. Let me accompany the Old Urchin on this ill-fated boat. We can use poison to combat poison. Let us see whether the Old Beggar's unlucky aura wins, or if your ill-fated boat prevails."

"Brother Qi, I thought you were going to stay on the island for several days," Huang Yaoshi said, "Why such a hurry to leave?"

"Within a few days the world's big beggars, medium-sized beggars, and little beggars will gather at Yueyang in Hunan province. They will look to the Old Beggar to appoint a new leader. Should the Old Beggar meet a calamity and return to heaven before appointing a successor, who will lead the world's beggars? That's why the Old Beggar has to go, whether he wants it or not. Your brother truly appreciates Brother Yao's generosity. When your daughter and son-in-law get married, I will come back to disturb the wedding."

Huang Yaoshi sighed, "Brother Qi, you are truly an ardent man; you dedicate your life toiling for others, like a horse that never stops galloping."

Hong Qigong laughed, "The Old Beggar never rides a horse and my feet can't be compared to a horse's hoofs. Aiyo! Something's wrong! You are indirectly scolding me by saying that my feet are hoofs; wouldn't that mean you are saying I am a horse?"

Huang Rong laughed, "Shifu, you said it yourself, my father didn't scold you."

"Of course, a Shifu will always be inferior to a father," Hong Qigong said, "Just for that I am going to take a Mistress Old Beggar and we'll have a baby girl beggar for you to look after."

Huang Rong clapped her hands, "That's great! I will have a little beggar martial sister to play with. Won't that be fun?"

Ouyang Ke stole a glance at her; in the bright sunlight she looked so beautiful with her pink cheeks like a spring flower and as colorful as the rosy-colored clouds at dawn. He couldn't help but feel crazy about her. However, from her, his thoughts went to Guo Jing and his pulse quickened. Knowing she only had eyes for Guo Jing, his anger rose and he swore in his heart, "There will come a day when I will kill this stinky kid."

Hong Qigong held out his hand to help Zhou Botong onto the boat as he said, "Botong, I will accompany you on this new boat. Old Heretic Huang is so weird and we shouldn't pay any attention to him."

Zhou Botong was delighted, "Old Beggar, you are a very kind man, what do you say we become sworn brothers?"

Hong Qigong had not yet answered before Guo Jing interrupted, "Big Brother Zhou, you and I have become sworn brothers so how could you take my master as your sworn brother as well?"

Zhou Botong laughed, "What's the problem? If your father-in-law is kind enough and lets me ride on this new boat, I might be so happy as to take him as my sworn brother too."

"What about me?" Huang Rong laughed.

Zhou Botong squinted his eyes, "I am not too keen to take on a baby girl; if I look at pretty women too much, they turn into trash." Taking Hong Qigong's arm he walked to the boat.

Huang Yaoshi quickly blocked their way, stretching both arms and saying, "Old Huang does not dare to take advantage of others. Riding on this boat will bring more harm than good. Gentlemen, you don't need to prove your courage, it is well known on the Central Plains."

Hong Qigong laughed heartily, "You have repeatedly warned us; even if the Old Beggar returns to heaven due to seasickness I will still appreciate Brother Yao's friendship." Although he said those things jokingly, in his heart he was quite wary since Huang Yaoshi had twice tried to stop them from boarding the boat. He knew something was wrong with that boat, but Zhou Botong was insistent on going aboard. He'd seen with his own eyes how stubborn Zhou Botong was. If something really went wrong, Zhou Botong could not possibly face the danger alone with his internal injury and all. That was the reason he made up his mind to go with Zhou Botong.

Huang Yaoshi made a 'humph' sound and said, "You two gentlemen are experts in martial arts; I am sure you would be able to turn bad luck into good. Old Huang worries too much. You, the boy named Guo, you are going with them."

Guo Jing was startled. When he became Huang Yaoshi's son-in-law he was called 'Jing'er' but now Huang Yaoshi suddenly changed the way he called him; moreover, his

expression was so stern. Looking at Huang Yaoshi he said, "Father-in-law ..."

"Who's your Father-in-law?" Huang Yaoshi cut him off with a harsh voice, "You are a greedy lying boy! If you ever set foot on Peach Blossom Island again, even half a step, don't blame Old Huang for being ruthless." Reaching backwards he grabbed a servant's collar and shouted, "This is your example!" The deaf and mute servant's tongue had been cut out, so only a low deep gurgling was heard from his throat as his body flew into the sea. His internal organs had been crushed by Huang Yaoshi's palm. He dropped to the sea and in an instant disappeared without a trace among the waves.

The other deaf and mute servants were extremely terrified and they all knelt down at once. All were originally criminals and Huang Yaoshi had investigated their backgrounds carefully before capturing them one by one and taking them to the island. He cut out their tongues and pierced their ear drums, making them his slaves. He once said, "Old Huang is not a gentleman, so Jianghu people call me the Eastern Heretic. Naturally I don't like gentlemen as my companions and I prefer wicked people to be my servants. The more wicked they are, the more I like them." Seeing that servant, even though he deserved to be condemned, struck by his palm and thrown out into the sea without any reason, had shaken everyone. They could not help but sigh inwardly, "The Old Heretic Huang is really wicked."

Guo Jing was frightened; he also knelt down on the ground.

"What did he do to offend you?" Hong Qigong asked.

Huang Yaoshi did not answer his question, instead, he sternly asked Guo Jing, "Did you or did you not give the

second volume of the 'Nine Yin Manual' to Zhou Botong?"

"I did give something to Big Brother Zhou, but I really did not know it was the manual," Guo Jing said, "If I'd known ..."

"What do you mean you didn't know?" Zhou Botong interrupted. He was always ignorant as to what was serious and what was not. The more other people were upset, the more he wanted to play practical jokes on them. Without waiting for Guo Jing to explain he said, "You said it yourself, that you took that manual from Mei Chaofeng and said you were lucky that old man Huang Yaoshi didn't know. You also said that after you mastered the manual, you will become the number one martial arts expert in the world."

Guo Jing was stupefied. "Big Brother, I ... when did I say that?" he said with a trembling voice.

Zhou Botong's eyes glittered and with a stern voice he said, "You certainly did say that."

The fact that Guo Jing was able to recite the book was well-known to those present; whether he knew it was the 'Nine Yin Manual' or not, nobody cared. Now that Zhou Botong had confirmed it, Huang Yaoshi was very, very angry. Why would he think Zhou Botong was only joking? He forgot that Zhou Botong was childish and always liked to make jokes, while Guo Jing was naïve and unable to tell lies. He was so wild with rage that he was afraid he would rip Guo Jing apart and thus smear his own reputation; so instead he raised his hands in respect towards Zhou Botong, Hong Qigong and Ouyang Feng, saying, "Please forgive me!" Pulling Huang Rong's hand he turned around and walked away.

Huang Rong still wanted to have a few words with Guo Jing. "Jing ge ge ..." she called; but she was pulled by her father

and in a blink of an eye they had traveled dozens of feet, disappearing into the forest.

Zhou Botong burst out in laughter, but stopped abruptly because his chest hurt. Finally he chuckled and said, "The Old Heretic Huang has fallen into my trap. I spoke nonsense to deceive him and he took it seriously. Amusing...very amusing!"

Hong Qigong was taken aback. "Then Jing'er really didn't know beforehand?" he asked.

Zhou Botong laughed, "Of course he didn't know! He thought the 'Nine Yin' martial arts were evil; had he known, he wouldn't have wanted to learn it with me. Brother, you memorized the manual really well didn't you? Even if you want to forget it, you can't, can you?" He held his stomach and burst out into laughter again and didn't care if it hurt his chest, so his expression was really distorted.

Hong Qigong stomped his foot. "Ay! Old Urchin! Don't you think this joke is too much? I am going to talk to Brother Yao." Moving his feet he dashed into the forest, but the pathways were confusing and he did not know which way Huang Yaoshi had gone. As for the deaf and mute servants, as soon as their master left, they scampered away following him. Hong Qigong had no one to lead him, so he was compelled to come back. Then he suddenly remembered that Ouyang Ke had the detailed map of Peach Blossom Island. "Nephew Ouyang, can I borrow the Peach Blossom Island map, please?" he asked urgently.

Ouyang Ke shook his head, "Without Uncle Huang's permission little nephew does not dare to let other people see it; Uncle Hong please don't blame me."

"Humph!" Hong Qigong snorted. In his heart he said, "I am really stupid; how can I borrow the map from this kid? He



earnestly wishes for Old Heretic Huang to hate my dumb disciple." While he was still staring at the forest he suddenly saw some white shadows coming. It turned out they were Ouyang Feng's thirty-two white clothed dancing girls.

As they came close to Ouyang Feng, they bent their knees and one of them said, "Master Huang told us to go back with Master."

Ouyang Feng did not even look their way; he simply waved his hand telling them to board his boat. To Hong Qigong and Zhou Botong he said, "I am afraid Brother Yao might have put some booby-traps on board. Don't you two gentlemen worry, Little Brother will follow closely in my boat. In case of an emergency we can lend you a hand."

Zhou Botong angrily said, "Who wants your charity? I want to see what kind of gadgets Old Heretic Huang put on his boat. If you follow us the danger won't be there; where is the fun part then? If you mess with me, the Old Urchin will drench you with urine one more time!"

Ouyang Feng laughed, "Very well! In that case, until we meet again." He cupped his fists and took his nephew aboard his boat.

Guo Jing was still staring blankly at where Huang Rong had disappeared, lost in thought. Zhou Botong laughed, "Brother, let us board the boat. I wonder if this ill-fated boat will swallow the three of us alive" His left hand took Hong Qigong's arm and his right hand pulled Guo Jing along and together they boarded the new boat.

The boat came with seven or eight sailors who waited to serve them; they were all mute. Zhou Botong laughed, "One day Old Heretic Huang will be so angry that he cuts out his precious daughter's tongue. Only then will I admire him for

having guts.” Listening to this Guo Jing could not help but shiver. Zhou Botong saw him and laughed heartily, “Are you afraid?” he asked, and then made a hand signal to the sailors to start sailing. The sailors hoisted the anchor and raised the sail; under a southern wind they headed north.

“Come,” Hong Qigong said, “Let us take a look at this boat and see what is so strange about it.” Three men walked the boat from stem to stern; from the deck to the bottom of the hold. The boat was painted in bright and clear paint and the hold contained a supply of food and drinks...water, white rice, wine, meat and vegetables in abundance. But nothing was out of the ordinary.

“Old Heretic Huang deceived us!” Zhou Botong said hatefully, “Where is the strange thing on this boat he was talking about? He is such a liar!”

Hong Qigong, however, still had doubts. He leaped to the mast and with his strength tried to rock the masts and the sails, but again, he found nothing out of the ordinary. He lifted his eyes and looked in the distance; he saw seagulls flying, the waves rolling and the horizon where the sea met the sky. The boat’s three sails were fully raised as they headed north. He opened his collar and enjoyed the invigorating wind. Turning his head he saw Ouyang Feng’s boat following approximately two li [about 1 km] behind.

Hong Qigong leaped down from the mast and made a hand signal to the sailor at the rudder telling him to change course to the northwest. A moment later he looked again and saw that Ouyang Feng’s boat had also changed direction to the northwest.

“What is he following us for?” Hong Qigong muttered under his breath, “Can he really have good intentions? The day Old Venom shows kindness of heart, the sun may have to

rise in the west.” He was afraid if Zhou Botong knew he would throw a fit of temper. He didn’t say anything, but signaled the sailor to change course to the east.

The boat made such an abrupt turn that the sails were almost touching the water and they slowed down. In approximately the time needed to drink a cup of tea Ouyang Feng’s boat also changed direction to the east. “If you want to settle our score on the sea, that’s all right with me,” Hong Qigong thought.

He left the deck to enter the cabin and saw Guo Jing looking depressed; he was quiet and lost in thought. Hong Qigong said, “Tu’er [disciple], let me teach you how a beggar begs for rice: if the master of the house does not give you anything, you hang around his door for three days and three nights and see if he still refuses to give you anything.”

Zhou Botong laughed, “What if the master of the house owns a vicious dog? What if he told the dog to bite you because you don’t want to go? What would you do?” he asked.

Hong Qigong laughed, “In that case he is a heartless rich man. If you come again at night and steal his belongings, you are not violating heaven’s law.”

Zhou Botong turned to Guo Jing. “Brother, do you understand your Master’s speech? He taught you to be persistent in front of your father-in-law. If he still won’t give his daughter to you and beats you for no reason, then you can steal her at night,” he said, “But if you really want to steal that treasure, you don’t have to do it yourself; all you need to do is call out, ‘bao bei er [Treasure, precious], come!’ And she will come out and follow you.”

Listening to him Guo Jing was unable to restrain a smile. He watched Zhou Botong pacing up and down the cabin; he

could not stay still even for a moment. Suddenly a thought came into his mind, "Big Brother, do you have a destination in mind?" he asked.

"I don't have one," replied Zhou Botong, "I will go where my heart tells me to. I stayed on Peach Blossom Island for too long and I felt cooped up."

"I have a favor I'd like to ask Big Brother," Guo Jing said.

Zhou Botong shook his head. "No, I am not going to Peach Blossom Island to help you steal a wife, I don't want to."

Guo Jing blushed, "No, not that," he said, "I want to bother Big Brother to visit Cloud Manor in Yixing, by Lake Tai."

"What for?" Zhou Botong asked.

"The Cloud Manor Master, Lu Chengfeng is a brave hero," Guo Jing explained, "He was Father-in-law's disciple. Because of the 'Twin Killers of the Dark Winds', Father-in-law broke his legs and he became a cripple. Big Brother's legs recovered, so I want to ask Big Brother to teach him the technique of healing his legs."

"That's easy," Zhou Botong said, "Even if Old Heretic Huang broke my legs again, I know how to heal myself. If you don't believe me, go ahead, break my legs." After saying that, he sat on a chair and stretched out his legs with a challenging look on his face.

Guo Jing smiled, "I don't need to try, I know Big Brother has this ability," he said.

While they were still talking a loud crashing noise was suddenly heard. The door burst open and a sailor came rushing in with a terror-stricken expression. He could not speak, so he just gesticulated in panic. Three of them knew

something was terribly wrong, so they dashed out of the cabin.

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Huang Rong wanted to have a word with Guo Jing but was pulled away by her father. She was very upset. As soon as they arrived at their home she went straight to her room and locked the door, crying uncontrollably. In anger Huang Yaoshi had expelled Guo Jing from the island; now that his anger had subsided he regretted his rash decision. He realized he had sent Guo Jing to his death. He wanted to comfort his daughter, but no matter how hard or how long he knocked on her door, she just turned a deaf ear to him. During supper he called for her, but she did not appear; he sent a servant with Huang Rong's dinner but she threw it to the floor and even hit the servant a couple of times.

"Father said that if Jing ge ge ever sets his foot on this island again he will kill him. I want to go and find him, but how can I leave Father alone here? He will definitely be grieved," Huang Rong pondered it back and forth, but could not come up with any ideas until her stomach hurt.

Several months ago Huang Yaoshi scolded her and she ran away from the island; with childish thoughts she did not want to go back. Afterwards, when she met her father again, she saw that the number of white hairs on his temple had suddenly increased. It had only been several months, but he looked ten years older than she remembered him. She felt really sorry, and promised in her heart never to leave him again. Who would have thought that she would now face this difficult situation? She stayed on her bed all day, crying. She thought, "If Mother were still alive, she would take care of me; would she allow me to suffer like this?"

While thinking about her mother she decided to get out of the room and walked through the hall to the front door. Her house on Peach Blossom Island had a front door that was always open, night and day, unless there was storm coming. Huang Rong went out into the yard. There was a starry sky and the air was heavy with the scent flowers. "Jing ge ge must be many li away by now; I wonder when we are going to see each other again," she wondered in her heart. She heaved a deep sigh, wiped the tears from her eyes with the end of her long sleeve, and walked toward the flower bushes at the end of their yard. Entering the bushes and brushing away the leaves she arrived at her mother's tomb.

The exquisiteness of the coffin's wood, the various plants and rare orchids and the different flowers that bloomed at different seasons, were all Huang Yaoshi's personal choices. They glowed in the moonlight with each radiating its own unique scent. Huang Rong pushed the entrance stone three times to the left and three times to the right; then exerting her strength she pushed it. The entrance stone slowly moved to the side, revealing a long and narrow stonewalled tunnel. She went in, and after making three turns, she arrived at another secret door. Beyond this door was where the coffin was placed. The room was lit by an oil lamp inside a precious stone container, illuminating Huang Rong's mother's memorial tablet.

Alone in that small underground room and seeing the painting of her deceased mother made by her father's own hand, Huang Rong's heart was filled with a roller coaster of emotions. She thought, "I have never seen Mother. I wonder if, after I die, will I meet her? Was she really that young and beautiful as in the picture? Where is she right now? Is she in the heaven above, in the earth below, or still in this room? I am going to stay here forever to accompany her."

Along the walls of this tomb there were precious jewels, antique collections, paintings and calligraphy from famous artists; each worth a fortune. After his wife died, Huang Yaoshi roamed the sea and lakes to collect these precious articles. Whether it was inside the imperial palace, inside the house of some rich government official, or in a robbers' den high up in the mountains, as long as he knew there was a treasure, he would come and steal it or take it by force. His martial arts were high and he had keen eyes and sophisticated tastes, so he managed to collect quite a few treasures which he piled up inside his wife's tomb.

Huang Rong could see bright pearls, beautiful jade, emeralds and amethysts glimmering in the firelight; she thought, "These precious jewels don't have any feelings, yet they will last for millions of years. Today I am looking at them in here, but in the future my body will turn into dust and they will still be here. Is it true that among living things, the smart and intelligent won't have a long life? Was it because she was so smart that my mother died when she was only twenty?"

Huang Rong stared at her mother's picture for a moment, heaved a sigh, then blew out the light and walked to her mother's coffin. She stroked the coffin lovingly and sat on the floor. Her heart was heavy with self-pity. She was leaning on the coffin, pretending she was being cuddled at her mother's side, relying on her for consolation. Earlier that day she experienced great joy and great anxiety; that night she was completely exhausted and after a while she drifted off to sleep.

She dreamt she was inside the Zhao Palace in Beijing, all alone and fighting a group of martial artists; then the scenery changed, she was in the northern area and unexpectedly met Guo Jing there. She'd barely said a few words to him when her mother suddenly showed up. She

just knew it was her mother even though, try as she might, she could not see her face clearly. Then her mother started to fly into the sky while she called and pursued on the ground. Her mother was flying higher and higher and she was so scared. Then out of the blue she heard her father's voice calling her mother. At first it was a distant sound, and then the voice got nearer and clearer. Huang Rong awoke with a start but her father's voice could still be heard, mumbling indistinctly in front of the curtain. Then she calmed herself and realized that it was not a dream; her father was indeed inside the tomb, talking to her mother's spirit.

When she was little her father often brought her here; he would tell her mother anything that happened outside, regardless of how trivial those matters were. For the past several years she did not go with her father as often, yet it did not surprise her to hear her father talking in front of the coffin. She was still upset with him and did not want to see him. She wanted to wait quietly until he left, but what she heard next surprised her.

"I have found your heart's desire," he said, "I know you suffered a lot that year you rewrote the 'Nine Yin Manual'. I wanted to find it and burn it in your presence, so your spirit in heaven will be consoled. I have searched in vain for fifteen years, but today I found it."

Huang Rong was surprised, "Where did Father get the 'Nine Yin Manual'?" she wondered.

"I did not intentionally want to kill your son-in-law," she heard her father continue. "But it was they who insisted on riding on that boat."

Huang Rong was puzzled, "Mother's son-in-law? Is he talking about Jing ge ge? He's on that boat, then what?"



She opened her ears and listened attentively.

Huang Yaoshi recounted how miserable and lonely his life had become since his wife passed away and how badly he missed her. Huang Rong listened to him pouring out his heart and her own heart was filled with sorrow. "Jing ge ge and I are mere youngsters and we love each other. I don't think it will be impossible to see each other in the future; but I cannot leave my father," she thought.

Once her mind was set, she continued listening to her father. "The Old Urchin destroyed the entire 'Nine Yin Manual' with the strength of his hands. I thought my hopes of sacrificing the manual to you were shattered. Who would have thought that, perhaps by divine intervention, he would insist on riding the boat I made for our future meeting?" he said.

"Every time I wanted to play aboard that boat Father always sternly prohibited me; how would he use the boat to meet Mother?" Huang Rong wondered.

Huang Yaoshi loved his wife very much. Moreover, his wife died because she wanted to make him happy. Therefore, he wanted to commit suicide as a sacrifice to her. But he knew his martial arts were profound, so he could not die easily by hanging himself or simply drinking a poison. Besides, if he died on the island, he was sure his deaf and mute servants would mutilate his body. Therefore he went to the mainland and kidnapped a highly skilled boat builder to build him this fancy boat.

This boat's keel was no different than a regular boat's, except that the bottom of the boat was not nailed together with metal nails, but put together with ropes and glue. Moored at the marina it looked like an extremely magnificent and beautiful yacht; but as soon as it sailed

onto the sea, the waves would destroy the ropes and glue, and the boat would certainly sink.

Originally he intended to put his wife's coffin on the boat, take the boat onto the sea and while the waves rocked the boat, he would play on his jade flute the 'Jade-Colored Tidal Wave' song. Together with his wife they would be buried thousands of feet beneath the sea. That way he would make a clean end to his life without disgracing his reputation as the martial arts master of his age. However, every time he wanted to go, he could not bear the idea of taking their daughter along, but who would raise her if he died? Finally he decided to build a tomb and placed his wife in it. He repainted the boat every year, so it always looked new. He was going to wait for their daughter to grow up before taking his last voyage.

Of course Huang Rong did not know of her father's plan. But she kept listening anyway. "The Old Urchin was able to recite the 'Nine Yin Manual' completely and that Guo kid could also recite it from memory. If I sink those two into the sea, it would be the same as though I was burning the two manuals for you. If your spirit in heaven knows this, you can then rest in peace. My only regret was that the Old Beggar Hong will lose his life in vain; it is rather unfair to him. Within one day I have killed three martial arts masters for your sake. When we meet again, you can certainly say that your husband has fulfilled his promise to you. Ha ... ha ... !"

After listening to this last part, the hair on Huang Rong's neck stood up and her heart turned very cold. She did not completely understand what was going on, but knowing her father's abilities very well, she was sure that there must be something terribly wrong with that boat. She was anxious for the safety of Guo Jing and the other people on board. Her heart was filled with shock and sorrow at the same time. She wanted to stand up and beg her father to save

them, but she was neither able to stand nor speak; her legs were weak and her throat dry from fear. She only heard her father's long and mournful laughter – sounding like a song or a cry, as he walked out of the tomb.

Huang Rong tried to calm herself down and thought out loud, "I must go to rescue Jing ge ge. If I can't make it, I will still die with him." She knew her father's strange temper well; he'd become crazy because of his excessive love for his deceased wife and it would be useless to ask him for help. She dashed out of the tomb towards the seashore where she jumped on a boat, woke up the deaf mute servants in charge of the boat and immediately set sail.

Suddenly she heard hoof beats coming her way and at the same time she could hear her father's jade flute in the distance. Huang Rong looked back; it was Guo Jing's little red horse, galloping in the moonlight. It had been wandering aimlessly on the island and that particular night it ran towards the seashore. Huang Rong thought, "Where can I find Jing ge ge on this boundless sea? The little red horse has divine abilities on dry land, but on the water it is completely useless."

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Hong Qigong, Zhou Botong and Guo Jing dashed out of the cabin only to find their feet submerged in water almost to their knees. They were extremely shocked. Immediately they jumped up onto the mast; Hong Qigong even remembered to snatch a couple of deaf and mute sailors. They looked down and saw the turbulent water rising fast. It all happened so fast that they were at loss as to what to do.

"Old Beggar," Zhou Botong called, "Old Heretic Huang is so amazing! I just wonder how he built this boat?"

"I don't know!" replied Hong Qigong, "Jing'er, hold the mast tightly, don't let go ..."

Guo Jing was about to answer when a loud crack was suddenly heard; the boat broke in two and both halves slowly sank into the water. The two sailors were so shocked that they lost their hold on the mast and fell down into the raging water below. Zhou Botong flexed his muscles and jumped into the water.

"Old Urchin!" Hong Qigong called, "Do you know how to swim?"

Zhou Botong's head came out of the water, "I guess I'll just have to try ..." he laughed. These exchanges happened in the midst of howling winds and they could not hear each other clearly.

By this time the mast was leaning far enough that it would hit the water very soon. Hong Qigong called out, "Jing'er, the mast is joined to the hull; let's break it free. Come on!" The two gathered their strength and struck the mast near its center. Although the mast was made from solid wood, how could it withstand the combined forces of Hong Qigong and Guo Jing? After several strikes, with a 'Crack', the mast gave way. The two held on to it and together they fell into the sea below.

They were already many li away from Peach Blossom Island and looking in all directions there were towering waves as high as a mountain; there was no land in sight. Hong Qigong was secretly very anxious. Drifting on the sea like this, without food or fresh water, should nobody rescue them, they would certainly die in less than ten days no matter how high their martial arts skills were. Hong Qigong tried looking for Ouyang Feng's boat but it was nowhere to

be seen. He heard someone laughing hard to the south of them, it was Zhou Botong.

“Jing’er,” Hong Qigong said, “Let’s try going to him.” With one hand holding the mast, the other hand paddled towards Zhou Botong. The waves were quite strong, so as they moved dozens of zhang they were pushed back dozens of zhang.

“Old Urchin, we are coming!” Hong Qigong laughed. Due to his strong internal energy, his voice could be heard amidst the sound of the roaring waves around them. They heard Zhou Botong calling out, “The Old Urchin has become a dog in the water; sort of like an old dog in salty soup!”

Guo Jing was amused that in a situation as dangerous as this, he still had the urge to goof around; truly he did not bear the title ‘the Old Urchin’ in vain.

The sea was raging wildly around them and no matter how hard they tried, they were still dozens of zhang apart from each other. Only after working hard for a long time did they finally manage to get together on the broken mast. As soon as Hong Qigong and Guo Jing saw Zhou Botong, they were unable to stifle their laughter; Zhou Botong had used sail rope to tie a piece of board to his feet and used his excellent lightness kungfu to tread on the waves. Unfortunately the waves were too strong. Even though his body was going up and down with the waves, free and unrestrained, it was actually very difficult to move forward. Zhou Botong played on the water enthusiastically, seemingly oblivious of the danger they were facing.

Guo Jing looked around to see their boat was gone along with all the crew; they were buried under the sea. Suddenly he heard Zhou Botong call out in alarm, “Aiyo! This is serious! The Old Urchin might meet a cruel death.”

Hong Qigong and Guo Jing heard his frightened voice and asked, "What is it?"

Zhou Botong pointed his finger and said, "Sharks...a school of sharks!"

Guo Jing grew up on the steppes so he did not know how fierce a shark was. He turned around to see Hong Qigong's face looking strange. He wondered what kind of monster a shark was that would make his master and big brother Zhou, who were used to facing danger with smiles on their faces, look so nervous.

Hong Qigong sent his strength to his palm and broke the end of the mast; then he divided the broken pieces further into two halves. Suddenly he saw a shark's head appear amongst the white foam of the waves; its two rows of sharp white teeth glistening in the sunlight. It was only for a moment, and then it disappeared under the water. Hong Qigong threw a wooden stick to Guo Jing. "Aim for their heads!" he called out.

Guo Jing groped in his pocket and produced a dagger. "Disciple has a dagger!" he called back and threw the wooden stick toward Zhou Botong.

By now there were four or five sharks circling around Zhou Botong; it looked like they were assessing the situation, but no shark had attacked yet. Zhou Botong leaned over and struck; a shark's head split open. As soon as the other sharks smelled blood they all attacked their dead comrade.

Guo Jing saw the water's surface bubbling like boiling water; he wondered how many thousands of sharks were there. He saw white teeth flashing and in a very short moment, nothing was left of that dead shark. He was horrified. Suddenly he felt something bump his feet. Nervously he kicked around and a big shark shot up from

the water towards him. With his left hand holding the mast he sent all his might to his right hand and with unmatched accuracy his extremely sharp dagger made a hole in the shark's head. Again the water boiled as a group of sharks feasted on their dead companion. Thousands of sharks were moving and biting randomly in the water.

The three men's martial arts were superb; surrounded by thousands of sharks they moved to the west and dodged to the east. Every time their hands struck, a shark was either dead or heavily injured while their own bodies were not even scratched. As soon as a shark bled, it became the other sharks' food and in a flash it became a pile of cartilage sinking in the sea. Although the three's martial arts were profound and they had great courage, when they saw this sight, they could not help feeling frightened. The sharks were uncountable and seemed like they were killing them endlessly. They did not have time to think of anything else; they needed all their energy and concentration to fight and fight and fight ...

After hours of fighting they'd killed more than two hundred sharks, then fog began rising from the water as the sun slowly fell to the western horizon. Zhou Botong called out, "Old Beggar, Brother Guo, once the sky is dark all three of us will go into the sharks' tummies. Shall we make a bet? Who will be first to be eaten?"

"Is the first to be eaten the winner or the loser?" Hong Qigong asked.

"The winner, certainly," Zhou Botong replied.

"Aiyo, in that case I'd rather be the loser," Hong Qigong said. With the back of his hand he launched the 'Divine Dragon Swings its Tail' and hit a big shark on its side. That big shark weighed approximately 200 jins [100kg / 220 lbs], but

because of Hong Qigong's strength, it flew into the air, rolled twice, before it fell back into the water, creating a big splash. That shark turned belly up; it had been killed instantly.

"Excellent palm technique!" Zhou Botong praised, "I'll bow to you and take you as my master so you can teach me the 'Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms'. It's too bad I won't have time to learn it. Old Beggar, do you want to compete with me?"

"I am sorry I can't accommodate you right now," Hong Qigong said.

Zhou Botong laughed heartily, "Brother, are you scared?" he asked Guo Jing.

In his heart Guo Jing was really scared; but seeing these two people were still able to chat and make jokes in a life and death situation his spirits were lifted. "I was scared, but not anymore," he replied. Suddenly he saw a monstrous shark charging his way. He leaned sideways then lifted his left hand high in the air as bait. That big shark turned around and leaped out of the water to bite his hand. The dagger in Guo Jing's right hand moved upward and stabbed beneath the shark's mouth. Because the shark was moving forward, the dagger made a long cut along the shark's body. Blood gushed and the contents of its stomach spilled out.

By that time Zhou Botong and Hong Qigong had each killed another shark. Zhou Botong had not yet recovered from Huang Yaoshi's blow earlier; after fighting for such a long time he began to feel a severe pain in his chest. He laughed loudly and said, "Old Beggar, Brother Guo, I am so sorry I can't continue much longer, I'll have to be the first one



going into a shark's belly. Ay! Too bad you two didn't want to bet. I would've won!"

Even though he was laughing, Guo Jing could hear the desperation in his voice. "All right!" he shouted, "I'll bet with you!"

"At least now I can die an interesting death!" Zhou Botong laughed. As he turned around to avoid the converging attacks of two sharks charging in together he suddenly saw a high white sail far away. In the dim light of dusk a big private boat was cutting through the waves and coming their way.

Hong Qigong also saw the boat; it was Ouyang Feng's. They were exuberant knowing that help was on the way. Guo Jing immediately came near Zhou Botong to help him fight the sharks. A moment later the boat arrived and lowered two small boats to rescue the three people. Zhou Botong vomited some more blood, but he would not stop talking and laughing. He was waving his finger at the sharks and cursing them incessantly.

Ouyang Feng and Ouyang Ke stood on the bow of the big boat to welcome them. As far as their eyes could see, the water was full of shark fins; they were inwardly alarmed.

Zhou Botong was unwilling to admit indebtedness, he said, "Old Poison, it was you who came and rescued us; I did not call you for help so I don't owe you anything."

"Naturally you don't owe me anything," Ouyang Feng replied, "Today I come across the three of you engaged in a shark killing spree; Little Brother was fascinated."

Zhou Botong laughed, "You came across us and prevented us from playing inside the sharks' bellies, so I will still call it even; we don't owe anybody anything."

Ouyang Ke and a snake herder put some big chunks of beef on an iron hook as bait and in a short period of time had hooked seven or eight big sharks.

Hong Qigong pointed at the sharks and laughed, "Good, you didn't eat us, but it looks like we are going to eat you."

Ouyang Ke laughed, "Little Nephew has a way to avenge Uncle Hong." He quickly cut some short sticks, sharpened both ends, then pried open a shark's mouth with a spear and stuck the wooden stick in the shark's mouth. Then he kicked the shark back into the water.

Zhou Botong laughed, "That way the shark won't be able to eat anything ever; I bet it will die within eight to ten days."

Guo Jing thought, "Only he would think of such an evil plan. This gluttonous shark will starve to death in the sea. That is so cruel."

Zhou Botong saw Guo Jing's face showing a disgusted look, he laughed, "Brother, such a malicious trick is not pleasing to the eye, is it? Well, this is called 'a poisonous uncle results in a poisonous nephew'."

Hearing others cursing him as evil did not bother Western Poison Ouyang Feng at all; on the contrary, he was pleased. Listening to Zhou Botong he showed a faint smile and said, "Old Urchin, this small trick is nothing compared to what the Western Poison can do. You three are out of breath from fighting this bunch of baby sharks. Even though they are many, to me they are nothing." After saying that he faced the sea, stretched out his right hand, moved it in a sweeping motion from left to right and said, "Even if there were ten times more sharks than these, I can annihilate them all without breaking a sweat."

"Ah!" Zhou Botong exclaimed, "The Western Poison blows his horn really loud! If you can prove your great prowess and really kill the sharks, the Old Urchin will kowtow to you and will call you 'Grandfather' three hundred times."

"I do not dare to accept that," Ouyang Feng said, "If you don't believe me, why don't we make a bet?"

"All right," Zhou Botong almost shouted, "I'll bet you my head!"

Hong Qigong, on the other hand, was suspicious, "Even if his skills are as high as the sky, it is impossible to kill millions of sharks at once," he thought, "I am afraid he has another evil scheme up in his sleeve."

"I don't need your head," Ouyang Feng said with a smile, "If I win, I want you to do something for me and you must comply with it. If I lose, I won't decline whatever difficult matter you want me to do. What do you think?"

"I don't care, whatever you say!" Zhou Botong shouted.

Ouyang Feng turned to Hong Qigong, "I am asking Brother Qi to be our witness," he said.

Hong Qigong nodded, "Very well," he said, "But what if the winner assigns the loser something and he is not able to do it?"

"Then the loser must jump into the sea to be eaten by the sharks," Zhou Botong said.

Again Ouyang Feng showed a faint smile but he did not say anything. He signaled a servant to bring a small wine cup. Two of his right fingers pinched the neck of the strange looking snake on his staff, forced it to open its mouth and venom gushed from its teeth. Ouyang Feng held out the wine cup and caught the venom in it, black and thick like

China ink, almost filling half the cup. As soon as this snake ran out of venom, he pinched the other one and did the same, filling the whole cup with snake's venom. When he was finished the two snakes wrapped around the staff quietly, no longer slithering up and down, like they were very tired.

Ouyang Feng's servant hooked another big shark and placed it on the deck. With his left hand Ouyang Feng gripped the shark's upper jaw, while his right foot stepped on the lower jaw, prying the jaws open. That shark was about two zhang's long [approximately 20 feet or 7 meters], but it could not prevent its mouth being opened revealing two rows of dagger-sharp teeth. Then he poured the cup of venom into the shark's mouth, right where the gaping wound caused by the iron hook was. With an abrupt movement his left hand lifted the shark by its belly and without much trouble swung it up. The 200 catty [about 100 kg / 220lbs] shark flew into the air and with a loud splash fell into the sea.

Zhou Botong laughed, "Aha! I understand now," he said, "This is the old monk's method of killing bedbugs."

"Big Brother," Guo Jing asked, "How did the old monk kill the bugs?"

"There was once an old monk who hawked concoctions for getting rid of bedbugs in a Bianliang [a city in Henan province] street market," Zhou Botong told him, "He claimed his concoction to be very effective; once the bugs ate his product they would surely die. If not, he was willing to reimburse the customer's money tenfold. Of course with this kind of guarantee his business was brisk. One of his customers went back home and scattered the concoction on his bed. Heh, heh ... that night the bedbugs still came by the thousands, biting him half to death. That customer was

upset and early the next morning he went back to the market to find that old monk, wanting him to refund his money. That old monk said, 'My concoction is very effective; if it did not kill your bugs, perhaps you did not use it correctly.' The customer asked, 'How do you use it?'" Reaching this point Zhou shook his head with a mischievous smile on his face, but did not continue.

"Then how do you use it?" Guo Jing asked.

With a straight face Zhou Botong said, "That old monk said, 'You catch the bug, pry open its mouth and feed just a little bit of this concoction to it. If it doesn't die, then you can come to the old monk again.' The customer was mad, he said, 'If I can catch the bug, I can crush it to death with my fingers, why would I need your effective concoction?' To which the old monk replied, 'Of course, I never said you can't crush it to death, did I?'"

Guo Jing, Hong Qigong, Ouyang Feng and his nephew, along with everyone who listened to Zhou Botong, burst into laughter. "My concoction is somewhat different than that of the old monk," Ouyang Feng said with a smile.

"I don't see much difference," Zhou Botong said.

Ouyang Feng pointed his finger to the sea and said, "Well, just take a look."

The shark fed the venom went belly up, and of course seven or eight other sharks were having a feeding frenzy over it. The strange thing was that the seven or eight sharks which ate their comrade's flesh were also belly up not too long afterwards. Each dead shark was immediately eaten by another group of sharks, which, in turn, also went belly up in the water. One shark killed ten others, ten sharks killed a hundred, a hundred killed a thousand; in not too long the sea was full of floating dead sharks. The remaining sharks

were not too many, but they were still feeding on their dead comrades. A while later the sea became calm, there were no more sharks left alive. When Hong Qigong, Zhou Botong and Guo Jing saw this chilling scene their faces paled. Hong Qigong sighed and said, "Old Poison, Old Poison...your evil plan was truly evil; only a small amount of poison from your two snakes is extremely deadly."

Ouyang Feng chuckled and looked at Zhou Botong with a smug expression. Zhou Botong wrung his hands, stomped his foot, and pulled his beard and hair erratically. As far as anyone could see, the sea's surface was full of dead sharks with their white bellies upward, floating and bobbing on the waves.

"Looking at so many white bellies makes my tummy sick; thinking about that many sharks being killed by the Old Poison's venom, also makes my tummy sick," Zhou Botong said, "Old Poison, you need to watch out; once the 'Dragon King of the Sea' [hai long wang] finds out, he is going to send his shrimp army and crab generals to deal with you." Ouyang Feng simply smiled without saying anything.

"Brother Feng, little brother is unclear about something and I beg you to explain it to me," Hong Qigong said.

"I don't dare," Ouyang Feng replied.

"It was only a small cup of venom; even if the poison was extremely deadly, how could it kill thousands of sharks?" Hong Qigong asked.

Ouyang Feng laughed, "This type of venom is very special," he explained, "As soon as it enters the blood the blood became poisonous. If this blood enters another shark's system, that second shark's blood will also be poisonous. Just imagine the amount of venom increasing a hundredfold. Each dead shark would multiply that amount

another hundredfold; very soon you'll have an infinite amount of venom able to kill forever."

"That is called perpetual killing," Hong Qigong commented.

"Exactly," Ouyang Feng replied. "Little brother's title is 'Western Poison'; if my skill in using poison is somewhat lacking, then I'm afraid I'm not worthy to hold that title."

While they were still talking the remaining sharks had already died. The other smaller fish were also gone; though not being eaten by the sharks, they still had disappeared so the sea was eerily calm.

"Sail away quickly...sail away quickly! The air here is too thick with poison," Hong Qigong urged.

Ouyang Feng gave a signal and the boat moved away at full speed; all the triangle shaped sails were raised. With the wind coming from the south they headed northwest.

"The Old Poison really sells effective concoctions to get rid of bedbugs," Zhou Botong said. "What do you want me to do?"

"I'd like to welcome the three of you into my cabin first," Ouyang Feng said, "You need to change into dry clothes, eat something, and then take a rest. About the bet, it won't be too late to talk about later."

Zhou Botong was really impatient, "That won't do, that won't do!" he called out, "Just say it! You won't gain anything by waiting. If the Old Urchin dies of suffocation, then it will be your loss for not telling me what you want."

Ouyang Feng smiled, "In that case, Brother Botong, please come with me."

## Chapter 20 - The Altered Manual

Translated by Frans Soetomo



*The burning mast separated two people. Ouyang Feng fetched his snake staff and jumped over the flaming mast. Hong Qigong immediately drew the*



*bamboo stick from his waist and fended off the attack. They had been ferociously fighting barehanded before, so imagine how fierce the battle had become now that both were wielding weapons.*

Hong Qigong and Guo Jing watched Ouyang Feng and his nephew lead Zhou Botong to a cabin in the back, while they were taken to a different cabin to change their clothes. Four white-dressed maidens served them. Hong Qigong laughed, "The Old Beggar has not had the luck to enjoy this kind of treatment," he said. After taking off all his clothes a maiden dried him with a clean towel.

Guo Jing felt blood flowing up his neck and face and he did not dare to take his clothes off. Hong Qigong laughed, "What are you afraid of? They won't eat you alive!" he said. Two maidens approached him to take his boots off and loosen his belt. Guo Jing quickly took back his boots and upper garment, jumped onto the bed and while hiding underneath a blanket, changed his clothes. Hong Qigong burst out laughing and the four maidens also giggled.

Once they were finished, two other maidens entered the cabin carrying trays full of wine, meat dishes, vegetables, and some white rice, saying, "Please gentlemen, quickly eat what we prepared."

Hong Qigong waved his hand, "All of you get out of here, please. When the Old Beggar sees good-looking ladies I can't get food into my tummy." The maidens smiled and complied, closing the door on their way out.

Hong Qigong lifted the wine and the dishes to his nose and sniffed them, "Don't eat or drink this," he whispered, "The Old Poison is so crafty. Just eat the plain white rice." He took the gourd from his back, pulled the plug and took two mouthfuls of wine. Then he quickly ate three big bowls of

rice. Guo Jing followed his lead and dumped the other dishes under the deck-boards.

"I wonder what they want Big Brother Zhou to do?" Guo Jing asked in a low voice.

"Can't be anything good," Hong Qigong replied, "This time the Old Urchin really got himself in trouble."

The cabin door was suddenly pushed open and a maiden said, "Master Zhou asks Young Master Guo to come to the rear cabin. He has something to discuss with you." Guo Jing looked at his master and walked out of the cabin following the maiden. They walked along the port side of the boat towards the back. The maiden lightly knocked on the cabin door and after waiting a moment, shoved the door open, announcing, "Young Master Guo has arrived."

Guo Jing entered the cabin and the door was closed behind him. There was no one inside the cabin. Guo Jing felt uneasy, but then a small door to his left opened and Ouyang Feng and his nephew walked in.

"Where is Big Brother Zhou?" Guo Jing asked.

Ouyang Feng closed the door with the back of his hand then took two steps forward and grabbed Guo Jing's wrist. His movement was very swift; not in a million years would Guo Jing have guessed that Ouyang Feng would do that. He felt like his wrist was grasped by a pair of tongs; he could not move. Ouyang Ke pulled a steel-spined folding fan from his sleeve and placed it on a vital acupoint on Guo Jing's back. Guo Jing was dumbstruck; he could not guess what the uncle and nephew wanted from him.

"The Old Urchin lost a bet with me, but when I asked him to do something for me he refused," Ouyang Feng coldly said.

“Hmm?” Guo Jing was confused.

“I told him to rewrite the ‘Nine Yin Manual’ from memory for me to read, but he unexpectedly did not keep his word,” Ouyang Feng explained.

“How could Big Brother Zhou give the manual to you?” Guo Jing thought; and again he asked, “Where is Big Brother Zhou?”

“It was he who said that whoever did not keep his word must jump into the sea to be eaten by the sharks. Humph! He finally made up his mind and did what he said he would,” Ouyang Feng said coldly.

Guo Jing was shocked. “He ... he ...” he stammered. He tried to pull his hand free and dash to the door, but Ouyang Feng’s grip was very tight, forcing Guo Jing to stop. Ouyang Ke pushed his fan slightly harder against Guo Jing’s ‘Most Positive’ [zhi yang] acupoint.

Ouyang Feng pointed to a table with a stack of paper, a brush and some ink on it and said, “In the whole wide world you are the only one who knows the manual’s full text. Write it down for me quickly.”

Guo Jing shook his head. Ouyang Ke smiled and said, “The food and wine you and the Old Beggar ate just now was poisoned. If you don’t take my Uncle’s antidote you will die within twelve hours, just like the sharks you saw earlier. If you comply, we will spare both you and your master’s lives.”

Guo Jing was quite shocked, “Had Master not been so alert we would certainly have fallen into their trap.” He stared at Ouyang Feng and thought, “You are a great master of martial arts, yet you commit a despicable act like this.”

Watching Guo Jing starring at him without saying anything Ouyang Feng said, "You have memorized the manual anyway. You won't lose anything by writing it down. What are you waiting for?"

Guo Jing shivered with rage, "You have harmed my sworn brother; now there is hatred as deep as the ocean between you and I. If you want to kill me then go ahead. But if you think you can force me, keep on dreaming!"

"Humph!" Ouyang Feng said, "Good, you have guts kid! You are not afraid of death, but does your master's life mean nothing to you?"

Before Guo Jing could reply a sudden loud bang was heard as the cabin door was shattered and wood fragments flew everywhere. Ouyang Feng turned his head to see Hong Qigong with a couple of wooden water barrels in his hands. Hong Qigong threw the water out from the barrels and two deep green transparent columns flew toward Ouyang Feng and his nephew. Ouyang Feng knew the fierceness of this water attack; he leaped to the left to elude it while his left hand still tightly held Guo Jing's wrist. The water hit the cabin's wall and splashed in all directions. Ouyang Ke loudly called out in alarm because Hong Qigong had grabbed the back of his head.

Hong Qigong laughed loudly, "Old Poison, you've always wanted to kill me by any means possible, fortunately the Heavens won't allow that to happen!"

Ouyang Feng saw his nephew had fallen into Hong Qigong's hands so he smiled and said, "Brother Qi, are you going to challenge me again? It won't be too late if we wait until we are ashore."

"I see you like my disciple so much that you won't let his hand go," Hong Qigong laughed.

"I made a bet with the Old Urchin and I won, didn't I?" Ouyang Feng asked, "You are our witness, are you not? Let me ask you this: The Old Urchin did not keep his word, did he?"

Hong Qigong repeatedly nodded his head in answer to his questions, "That's correct. Where is the Old Urchin?"

Guo Jing was grieved, he shouted, "Big Brother Zhou was ... he was forced to jump into the sea and die!"

Hong Qigong was startled; with Ouyang Ke still in his grip he jumped out of the cabin. He looked in all directions but all he could see were the billowing waves and not a glimpse of Zhou Botong.

Ouyang Feng, still gripping Guo Jing, also walked out onto the deck. Loosening his grip he said, "Nephew Guo, your skills are still quite far from being adequate. You let someone grab your hand without being able to do anything about it. Go and learn from your master for ten more years, then you can roam Jianghu again."

Guo Jing was worried about Zhou Botong's safety; he ignored his derogatory remarks and climbed the mast, looking at all directions.

Hong Qigong lifted Ouyang Ke and tossed him towards Ouyang Feng. He shouted, "Old Poison, you forced the Old Urchin to his death; the people of Quanzhen will deal with you. Your martial arts may be profound, but I don't believe you'll survive the Quanzhen Seven's combined force."

Ouyang Ke did not let his body touch the deck; his right hand pushed the deck and he somersaulted into an upright position while inwardly cursing, "Stinky beggar! By this time tomorrow you will crawl in front of me, begging me to save your life."

Listening to Hong Qigong's remark Ouyang Feng simply smiled faintly, "I am afraid you won't be able to witness it when it happens."

"Very well!," Hong Qigong said, "Until that time comes, I am going to use my dog beating stick to beat some wet dogs." Ouyang Feng raised his hands in salute then entered the cabin.

After looking around for a while without seeing anything Guo Jing climbed back down to the deck and told his master how Ouyang Feng had tried to force him to write out the manual. Hong Qigong nodded without saying anything as he quietly pondered, "Once the Old Poison sets his mind to something, he won't easily let go. Until he gets hold of the manual he will harass my disciple continually."

Guo Jing, thinking of Zhou Botong's death, cried mournfully. Hong Qigong also grieved. He knew the boat was sailing fast to the west and within two days they were going to reach land. He was afraid Ouyang Feng would poison their food again, so he went to the kitchen and plundered some dishes and plenty of rice. After eating it with Guo Jing, his head nodded and then he snored.

Ouyang Feng and his nephew waited until the afternoon of the next day; after nearly sixteen or so hours passed, they had not heard Hong Qigong or his disciple made any sounds. Ouyang Feng was afraid his poison was too strong and had killed them. Killing Hong Qigong was not a big deal, but killing Guo Jing meant the 'Nine Yin Manual' would be lost forever. He secretly took a peek through a crack in the door, only to see two people sitting comfortably and chatting amiably. Hong Qigong's voice was loud and clear. Ouyang Feng was enraged, "It seems the Old Beggar was alert. They weren't poisoned after all." His poison

collection was vast, but in order to poison Hong Qigong without harming Guo Jing, he had to think of a better plan.

Hong Qigong was telling Guo Jing the ins and outs of the Beggar Clan. He said that although they begged for a living, every member actually had the responsibility to uphold justice, to help those in distress, and to follow their predecessors' good deeds and not the bad ones. These facts were mostly hidden from the public eye. He talked further about the election procedure of the Beggar Clan Leader when the time came to find a successor. "It's a pity you don't like being a beggar," he said, "Otherwise you have the perfect character to be a leader; there is no one inside the clan superior to you. I'd really like to bestow the 'Dog Beating Stick' [da gou bang] on you." While they were still chatting there came a sudden banging noise from outside, it sounded like a hatchet or a chisel hitting the wall.

Hong Qigong jumped up in alarm, "Not good! That stinky snake is going to sink the boat," he shouted. Rushing towards the door he yelled to Guo Jing, "Quickly go to the small life boat at the back!" He had just finished shouting when, with a loud crash, a big hole appeared in a wooden partition, followed by loud hissing noises; it was not seawater that came rushing in, but dozens of venomous snakes.

"So it's the Old Poison's snake attack!" Hong Qigong mocked. His right hand swept, scattering dozens of steel needles and dozens of snakes were pinned to the wooden deck; with loud hissing noises their bodies coiled but they were not able to move forward any longer.

"Rong'er is very good at this needles scattering technique, but compared to Master she still falls far short," Guo Jing thought.

By that time dozens more snakes came through the hole in the wall. Hong Qigong kept shooting steel needles and more and more snakes were nailed to the floor. The sound of a wooden whistle was heard outside as more and more snakes were herded into the cabin.

Hong Qigong shot more and more needles, "The Old Poison kindly sends all these targets for me to practice my martial arts skill on; it is truly a rare opportunity," he said. But when he put his hand into his pocket to grab more needles he was startled to find only a few left. Inwardly he was alarmed considering that the snakes kept coming. He was thinking hard as to what to do next when a loud crash was suddenly heard as the wall behind him fell down and a palm swiftly moved towards his back.

Guo Jing was standing beside his master when he heard the swift and fierce wind; he turned around and using both hands he blocked the sneak attack. The incoming attack was so strong that he felt his stomach turning upside down and he almost passed out.

Having his attack unexpectedly blocked Ouyang Feng uttered a cry of surprise. He stepped back a little bit and then hacked horizontally with the back of his hand.

Guo Jing knew this attack would be hard to defend against, so with his left palm he parried the attack, while his right hand launched a counterattack towards Ouyang Feng's side, forcing him to withdraw. Ouyang Feng did not dare to take Guo Jing's palm hit on his side, so he ducked while sending out a hand in a chopping motion toward Guo Jing's lower body.

Guo Jing was aware that the situation was extremely critical. The snakes would keep coming in as long as Ouyang Feng could control the entrance; he and his master



would be in grave danger. He gritted his teeth and to the utmost of his ability used one hand to fend off the incoming attacks while the other hand tried to deliver counterattacks. When his left hand defended his right hand attacked; when his right hand was void his left hand was solid, following Zhou Botong's 'Mutual Hands Combat' technique.

Ouyang Feng had never seen this 'Mutual Hands Combat' technique before, so he was confused for the moment, giving Guo Jing a chance to use several stances. When comparing true martial arts skill, Ouyang Feng was two times superior to Guo Jing, but this 'Mutual Hands Combat' technique was so strange to him and it took him by surprise. Guo Jing was able to gain the upper hand for a while. But the Western Poison Ouyang Feng had enjoyed his title as a 'Great' for dozens of years; he was a great martial arts master, so he was confused only for a short time and soon thought of a method to deal with this strange technique. "Ugh!" with a loud grunt both his palms shot forward.

Guo Jing would not be able to block this attack single handedly; he was forced to step back, but behind him a mass of snakes could be heard hissing loudly.

"Wonderful...wonderful!" Hong Qigong shouted loudly, "Old poison, you can't even defeat my disciple; how can you boast about yourself as a great hero?" With the 'Flying Dragon Soaring Through the Heavens' [fei long zai tian] he leaped over both Ouyang Feng and Guo Jing's heads, towards Ouyang Ke. With one kick he knocked Ouyang Ke down. Hong Qigong then used his elbow and sent Ouyang Ke somersaulting towards Ouyang Feng's back. Ouyang Feng leaned sideways to avoid his nephew and because of that, Guo Jing escaped his vicious attack.

“Master’s martial arts skill is at par with his, while his nephew’s is below mine and he is injured. With two against two, we should certainly win,” Guo Jing thought. His spirits rose and with renewed vigor his hands and feet attacked Ouyang Feng like a violent storm.

While fighting violently with the enemy Hong Qigong kept his eyes open in all directions. He saw dozens of snakes approaching Guo Jing’s back, ready to strike. Once Guo Jing got bitten he would certainly die. Hong Qigong called out anxiously, “Jing’er, get out of here, quickly!” He increased the intensity of his attack against Ouyang Feng, forcing him to move away from Guo Jing.

Ouyang Feng was facing attacks from both his front and rear; he was feeling the strain. Hong Qigong’s attack had forced him to lean sideways, thus giving Guo Jing an opportunity to dash out of the cabin while Ouyang Feng and Hong Qigong remained in a fierce battle. Meanwhile hundreds of snakes slithered around the deck surrounding the two. “Fighting with pets as your helpers? You are shameless!” Hong Qigong mocked, but in his heart he was nervous. The snakes were countless and they were everywhere. With the dog beating stick in his right hand he crushed dozens of snake’s heads. Pulling Guo Jing’s hand they headed for the mast.

Ouyang Feng was inwardly alarmed, “This is not good! If those two leap onto the mast they will be unreachable for a while.” He flew out to block them.

Both of Hong Qigong’s palms made a ferocious chopping motion creating a roaring gust of wind. Ouyang Feng’s fist swept horizontally to parry. Guo Jing stepped forward to help his master, but Hong Qigong called out, “Just go to the mast, quickly!”

"I want to kill his nephew to avenge Big Brother Zhou," Guo Jing replied.

"The snakes...the snakes!" Hong Qigong urgently warned him.

Guo Jing saw vipers slithering all around him, so he did not dare to linger much longer. With the back of his hand he grabbed Ouyang Ke's 'Flying Swallow Silver Shuttle' [fei yan yin suo], then, leaping dozens of feet upwards, his left hand grasped the mast. At that very moment he heard the sound of an incoming projectile, so he shot the 'yin suo' from his hand and, with a loud clang, the two projectiles met midair; both changed directions towards the sides of the boat and fell into the sea. Guo Jing moved his hands and feet and in a short time he had reached the middle of the mast.

Ouyang Feng knew Hong Qigong also wanted to go up the mast so he intensified his attacks. Even though Hong Qigong was able to hold his ground he could not move towards the mast.

When Guo Jing saw the snakes crowding around his master's feet he was very anxious; with a loud shout he wrapped his legs around the mast and hung his body down. Hong Qigong understood his intentions; his left foot kicked the deck, his right foot flew toward Ouyang Feng's face while extending his dog beating stick towards Guo Jing. Guo Jing grabbed the end of his stick, pulled it upwards, and Hong Qigong's body flew into the air. With a loud laugh Hong Qigong's left hand caught the mast above Guo Jing. Now the two were high in the air looking down on their opponents and occupying a superior position.

Ouyang Feng knew that if he tried to climb the mast he would certainly be at a disadvantage, so he called out

loudly, "Very well! We lost this time. Turn the rudder to the east!" With an abrupt turn the boat sailed to the east.

From high above the deck Hong Qigong and Guo Jing could see that the snakes were very dense on the deck. Hong Qigong sat comfortably on the sail yardarm while he loudly sang the 'Falling Lotus Flower' [lian hua luo], a song beggars sang when begging for food. His face showed calmness, but he was actually very anxious. "How long can we stay on this mast?" he wondered, "Even if the Old Poison doesn't chop it down we still can't climb down if he does not call off the snakes. Those two can drink wine and sleep, but all the two of us can do up here is eat wind and urinate. That's it!" As soon as he remembered urinating, he stood up, pulled his pants down and sprayed his urine onto the snakes. "Jing'er," he shouted, "Let those scoundrels drink your urine and quench their thirst."

Guo Jing still enjoyed his childish side; he followed his master's instructions while shouting happily, "Please! Be my guests!" Both master and disciple sprayed their urine about.

"Get the snakes out of here...quickly!" Ouyang Feng barked while at the same time leaping back several steps. He moved so fast that Hong and Guo Jing's urine did not touch his body. Ouyang Ke, on the other hand, was startled upon hearing his uncle's anxious call and some drops of urine splashed on his face and neck. He was a neat and fastidious person, so naturally he was indignant; then he suddenly remembered, "Our snakes fear urine!"

Amidst the sounds of the wooden whistle the snakes slowly slithered away, but dozens of them closest to the mast were drenched in urine. These vipers were all hybridized in the snake valley of the Western Region where the White Camel Mountain was; their toxicity was extreme. Ouyang Feng had

used big bamboo baskets hung between several hundred pairs of camels to transport these vipers thousands of li to the Central Plains. He intended to use them as weapons to dominate the Wulin world, but the snakes were affected by human excretions. As soon as they were wet they started to squirm around, coiling in confusion and biting each other; the snake herders were unable to control them.

Hong Qigong and Guo Jing laughed long and hard at seeing the chaotic situation they'd caused. Guo Jing thought, "If Big Brother Zhou saw this I am sure he would be very happy. Ay! A major martial arts expert of this age had to die in the sea. Even with their level of martial arts skills, Island Master Huang and the Old Poison were still drenched by his urine; but my master's and my urine did not even touch the Old Poison."

About four hours later the sky gradually turned dark. The boat crew prepared banquet tables on the deck; meat and wine flowed freely and the sweet smelling aroma drifted upward assailing Hong Qigong and Guo Jing's nostrils. Ouyang Feng was very shrewd; how long could a glutton like Hong Qigong endure this kind of torture? The gourd on Hong Qigong's back was emptied only a short while later.

That night Hong Qigong and Guo Jing took turns on night watch duty. On the deck below them the crew lit dozens of lanterns, while a mass of snakes stayed on guard around the mast. They really did not have a chance of breaking this formidable defense, and they certainly could not urinate continuously.

Hong Qigong cursed Ouyang Feng's ancestors back eighteen generations, creating every fabricated scandal he could think of while adding some spice to make the scandals even more dramatic; but Ouyang Feng did not even come

out of his cabin. Hong Qigong cursed until his jaws were tired and he finally fell asleep.

Early the next morning Ouyang Feng sent a servant to shout loudly under the mast, "Hong Bangzhu, Guo Xiaoye [Clan Leader Hong, Young Master Guo], Master Ouyang has prepared a superb wine and food banquet for you to enjoy; please come down and enjoy it."

"You go and invite Ouyang Feng to come out and we will serve him our urine!" Hong Qigong shot back.

Not long afterwards the banquet table was readied below the mast. The foods were steaming hot and looked like they were fresh from the kitchen. They placed two chairs on each side of the table; it seemed they were waiting for Hong Qigong and Guo Jing to come down and enjoy their banquet.

Several times Hong Qigong wanted to slide down the mast and gobble down the food, but he knew it must be poisoned; he had no choice but restrain himself. He was so upset and started his 'your mother is a bitch' and 'you are a male dog with a bird's brain' series of curses.

By the third day the two were so hungry and thirsty that their heads began to spin. "If only my female disciple was here," Hong Qigong sighed, "She is so smart that I am sure she would come up with something to counter the Old Poison's tactics. All we can do is just stare and swallow our own saliva." Guo Jing also sighed.

About noon that day as the sun shone brightly, Guo Jing suddenly saw two white dots on the horizon. He thought they were a couple of white clouds, but the dots moved much too fast for clouds. They grew closer and got bigger and bigger and uttered loud cries. It was two white eagles.

Guo Jing was ecstatic; he curled his left fingers, put them in his mouth, and whistled repeatedly.

The eagles circled above the boat several times before diving down and perched on Guo Jing's shoulders. They were indeed the pair of eagles Guo Jing had raised on the Mongolian Steppe. "Master, could it be Rong'er is sailing this way?" he asked happily.

"That would be wonderful!" Hong Qigong replied, "Too bad these eagles are too small and can't carry us away from here. We are stuck here, at loss as to what to do. Quickly tell her to come here and think of something."

Guo Jing took out his dagger and cut two five inch square pieces from the sail and cut out two characters 'you nan' [lit. having trouble] on one and the outline of a gourd on the other piece. Then he strapped those pieces, one on each white eagle's leg, and said, "Fly back quickly and get Miss Huang to come here." The white eagles made some chirping sounds, stretched their wings, and flew from Guo Jing's shoulders. They circled the boat once then flew towards the west.

About an hour after the white eagles left, Ouyang Feng again tried to entice Hong Qigong and Guo Jing into coming down from the mast by preparing another banquet table, loaded with food and wine. Hong Qigong was indignant, "The Old Beggar is a glutton and the Old Poison is using this dirty trick to torture me. I've practiced martial arts my whole life, but I have to admit my spiritual strength is rather lacking. Jing'er, what do you say we go down and beat them up real good?"

"The white eagles will have already delivered our message; I believe the situation will change very soon. Please be patient and wait a little bit longer," Guo Jing replied.

Hong Qigong smiled. A while later he asked, "Among the world's disgusting aromas, what do you say is the worst?"

"I don't know. What is it?" Guo Jing replied.

"There was one time I wandered way up north. I was caught in a heavy snowstorm for eight days without any food; not even a squirrel could be found. I wanted to eat tree bark, but I couldn't find any of that either. I randomly dug around in the snow-covered ground and was lucky enough to find five living things, so I could extend my life another day. The next day I found a yellow wolf and that was able to satisfy my hunger."

"What were those five living things?" Guo Jing asked.

"They were earthworms, fat juicy earthworms. I just swallowed them alive, and did not dare to chew them," Hong Qigong replied.

When Guo Jing recalled how the slimy earthworms wiggled, he almost threw-up. Hong Qigong laughed heartily. He intentionally talked about the world's dirtiest and smelliest things to battle the aroma coming from the food and wine below them. He talked some more and cursed some more, before finally saying, "Jing'er, the Old Beggar has eaten earthworms, but there is something even more disgusting than them and the Old Beggar would rather eat my own toes than eat that thing. Do you know what it is?"

Guo Jing smiled, "I know...it's dung!" he exclaimed.

Hong Qigong shook his head, "No, it is dirtier than that." He let Guo Jing make some more guesses before bursting out in laughter, "I'll tell you what it is; the world's dirtiest and most disgusting thing is the Western Poison Ouyang Feng!"

"Right...that's right!" Guo Jing also burst out laughing.



After they'd suffered the whole afternoon, that evening Ouyang Ke came out and stood amidst his mass of vipers. He smiled and said, "Uncle Hong, Brother Guo, my uncle wants to borrow the 'Nine Yin Manual' just to take a look, nothing else."

Hong Qigong cursed under his breath, "That son-of-a-bitch....he has such good intentions!" In the midst of his anger an idea suddenly came into his head; but he kept a straight face and shouted loud and clear, "Little Rascal, the old man admits defeat to your dog-like uncle's evil scheme. Quickly prepare some food and wine and we'll talk again tomorrow."

Ouyang Ke was delighted; he knew Hong Qigong's word was as firm as a mountain and he certainly would live up to his promise. He gave the command to withdraw the snakes immediately. Hong Qigong and Guo Jing slid down the mast and went into the cabin; where Ouyang Ke's servants delivered all kinds of food and wine. As soon as the door was closed Hong Qigong immediately drank half a pot of wine, ripped apart half a chicken and started to chew.

"Is this food and wine free of poison?" Guo Jing asked with a low voice.

"Stupid kid," Hong Qigong said, "That bird brain wants you to write out the manual, he won't harm you just yet. Quickly eat as much as you can; we have things to discuss afterwards." Guo Jing silently agreed and in one breath he ate four big bowls of rice.

After eating and drinking to his heart's content Hong Qigong used the end of his sleeve to wipe his greasy mouth, then whispered in Guo Jing's ear, "The Old Poison wants the 'Nine Yin Manual' [jiu yin zhen jing] from you, so you will

write a 'Nine Yin Altered Manual' [jiu yin jia jing] for him." [Note: 'zhen' means real and 'jia' means fake.]

Guo Jing was puzzled, "Nine Yin Altered Manual?" he asked in a low voice.

Hong Qigong smiled, "That's right!" he said. "In this whole wide world, you are the only one who knows the 'Nine Yin Manual'. Whatever you want to write, just write. Who is going to say that what you write is not the real manual? You will intentionally alter and mix up the sentences and let him use that to train himself in that martial art. I am sure that if he practices for a hundred years he won't master even one part of it!"

Guo Jing was delighted and thought, "This is really a clever trick; the Old Poison will surely fall for it." But then he remembered something, "Ouyang Feng's martial arts are profound and he is also crafty and vigilant; if disciple just scribbles some nonsense, he will find out eventually, then what?" he asked.

"You have to write something that appears right but is actually wrong," Hong Qigong explained, "Write three correct sentences then alter the fourth one. Add or subtract some numbers, for example, if the manual says you need to do it eight times, change it to six or perhaps ten. As smart as he is, he will never find out. I am willing to spend seven days and seven nights without food or wine just to watch him train from the fake manual." Speaking to this point he could not restrain a smile.

Guo Jing laughed, "If he really practices according to the altered manual, not only will he waste his time and energy, but he could suffer some internal injuries as well," he said.

"Now quickly think carefully about how you are going to alter the manual; if he once gets suspicious, our plan will be

foiled,” Hong Qigong said with a smile; then he added, “The contents of the second volume was read and rewritten by Huang Yaoshi’s wife; moreover, that little rascal read it on Peach Blossom Island and therefore you can’t change that part too much, just add some incorrect words here and there. I am sure the little rascal won’t know the difference.”

Guo Jing silently recited the manual in his head, trying to think which sentences he could alter and where he could insert some misleading sentences. He replaced hold with move, above with below, and other simple alterations that did not require him to recompose a whole sentence; in short, he was following his master’s instructions to make subtle changes everywhere in the manual. For example, he changed the sentence ‘hand and mind toward the sky’ to ‘foot and buttock toward the sky’; or ‘feet firmly on the ground’ into ‘hands lightly moving on the ground’. On the internal energy cultivation he changed ‘concentrate ‘qi’ in the pubic region (dan tian)’ into ‘concentrate ‘qi’ in the chest and throat’.

While thinking about all these changes he could not restrain from heaving a heavy sigh and saying in his heart, “Playing practical jokes like this is Rong’er and Big Brother Zhou’s greatest delight. It’s a pity that one is nowhere near and the other is already dead. Someday I will see Rong’er again, but I will never be able to tell this story to Big Brother Zhou.”

Early the morning on the next day Hong Qigong called Ouyang Ke and proudly told him, “The Old Beggar’s martial arts are already unique; I don’t need to know the kinds of ‘Nine Yin Manual’ arts. As a matter of fact, even if you hold the manual in front of my face I won’t even cast a glance at it. Only some bird brain whose martial arts are useless would be dying to steal all sorts of gold and silver [play of words here: shen jing – divine scripture, shen jin – pure

gold, shen yin – pure silver]. Tell your dog-of-an-uncle that the manual will be written just for him. Tell him to shut himself up and train hard; when he's done, to come to the Old Beggar to test his newfound skills. The Manual is naturally a good thing, but I don't even want to give it a single glance. I want to see, if with the Manual's help, he will be able to defeat the Old Beggar. I want to see, if after he has painstakingly practiced the martial arts from the manual, whether he'll even be equal to [ban jin ba liang] the Old Beggar? I'd say he's just taking off his pants to fart; it's totally useless!"

Ouyang Feng was actually standing behind his cabin door, so he heard everything, but he was delighted instead of getting angry. "It's a very good thing the Old Beggar is so proud that he doesn't mind letting me have the manual," he thought, "Otherwise, even if I fought him, threatened him with snakes or poison, or starved him to death, it would still be difficult to force him."

"Uncle Hong, you are wrong!" Ouyang Ke said, "My Uncle's martial arts have reached perfection. With Uncle Hong's ability, you could not gain even half a move advantage; so why would Uncle want to learn the 'Nine Yin Manual'? My Uncle once told little nephew that he is convinced the 'Nine Yin Manual' has enjoyed an undeserved reputation. Otherwise, when Wang Chongyang won the book, why didn't he learn anything from it and demonstrate it in front of everybody? My Uncle wants to take a look at it to point out the errors and prove that the manual is actually a hoax. Wouldn't you say that it will benefit the Wulin world tremendously?"

Hong Qigong burst out in laughter, "You are foolishly blowing your horn too hard!" he mocked. "Jing'er, go ahead and write the manual from your memory. If the Old Poison

can point out any errors in the 'Nine Yin Manual', the Old Beggar will kowtow to him."

Guo Jing agreed and went out. Ouyang Ke led him to the big cabin where there was a stack of paper, some ink sticks and a brush; he'd even prepared the ink himself and respectfully waited at one side.

Guo Jing's had not had much schooling and his handwriting was shoddy; he often had to think about the characters he had to write so he worked very slowly. More than once he did not know how to write a certain character, so he had to ask Ouyang Ke to write it for him. Working until noon that day he'd barely finished the first half of the first volume.

Ouyang Feng did not show himself at all, but every time Guo Jing finished writing a page Ouyang Ke would take that page and give it to his uncle. Ouyang Feng looked at them carefully. Some sentences did not make any sense to him, but even though sloppy, the characters were clear. He thought those sentences must have very deep meanings behind them; when he returns to the west he will then slowly digest the manual. He believed that with his intelligence and ability he would eventually understand the manual thoroughly. After a dozen years or so he would master all of the martial arts in the manual. He could not help but feel elated. He knew Guo Jing was dumb, he also noticed Guo Jing's handwriting was plain and simple, almost child-like. He believed that a person like him would not be able to fabricate a complex manual such as this one. Besides, his nephew had told him that for many characters Guo Jing knew the sounds, but did not know how to write them, so his nephew had to teach him or write the characters himself. This was the real manual without a doubt. How could he know that this dumb kid had conspired with his master to deliberately alter the manual to deceive

him? As for the confusing sentences, he blamed that on Guo Jing's inability to remember the text correctly.

Guo Jing did not stop writing even though the sky had turned dark and he'd finished more than half of the second volume. Ouyang Feng did not allow him to return to his cabin for fear that Hong Qigong would convince him to change his mind and make things difficult for him. Even though he already had most of the manual in his hands, he wanted the complete manual. Therefore he arranged for a sumptuous meal and wine to be brought to Guo Jing and let Guo Jing continue to write without interruption.

Hong Qigong waited until about the end of the eleventh hour or early twelfth hour [about 9 pm] but Guo Jing did not come back. He felt queasy and afraid that Ouyang Feng had discovered their scheme and his dumb disciple might suffer the worst. He snuck out of his cabin and quietly walked towards the main cabin. There were two snake herders standing guard in front of the main cabin. Hong Qigong sent his left palm forward creating a gust of wind making the sail ropes move. The two snake herders heard the noise and looked around while Hong Qigong moved to the right. His movement was so quick that the two did not see a thing; they thought it was a ghost or something. Very soon Hong Qigong was at the starboard side of the main cabin.

Hong Qigong could see a faint glow coming out of the main cabin's window. He took a peek inside and saw Guo Jing still crouched at the desk, writing. Two white-clothed maidens stood beside him, keeping busy serving tea or lighting incense or replenishing the paper or preparing more ink. Guo Jing was well taken care of. Hong Qigong was relieved. Then his nostrils caught the scent of the wine. He fixed his gaze on it and saw in front of Guo Jing a cup of amber

brown aged wine, almost rouge in color; the sweet fragrance assailed his nose mercilessly.

Hong Qigong cursed inside, "The Old Poison is very stingy; because my disciple writes for him he serves him the best wine, but to the Old Beggar he only serves a very average cheap wine." He was the world's number one glutton and wine connoisseur; seeing his disciple with this excellent wine, how could he restrain himself from wanting some of it? "The Old Poison must store the good wine in the boat's hold; I am going to drink to his happiness, then replace the wine with my urine. Let him taste the Old Beggar's own vintage urine wine. Compared to what the Old Beggar and his disciple went through with the sharks, the Old Poison drinking some urine in his wine won't be too bad. At least he won't die because of it."

Having had this thought he could not help but smile; stealing wine and food was the skill he's most proud of. He once spent three whole months inside the Imperial Palace in Lin'an; he hid on a beam in the Imperial kitchen and tasted practically every single dish or wine that was to be served to the emperor. The Imperial Palace was heavily guarded, yet he was able to come and go like there were no other people there. Stealing food and wine from a boat's kitchen certainly would not give him any trouble.

He looked for the stairs that would lead him below and, after making sure nobody was watching, he carefully went down, relying on his nose to find where the food supply was. Even though the hold was pitch black, Hong Qigong's nose was able to smell food from a mile away. He slowly walked along the wall, lit a torch and saw six or seven wooden barrels piled up in the corner. Hong Qigong was delighted; he extinguished the torch after picking up a broken bowl he found laying around and put it in his pocket. He groped

around towards the barrels and tried to lift one. The barrel was very heavy; it could contain anything.

With his left hand he found the plug, while his right hand placed the bowl under it. He was about to pull the plug when his sensitive ears suddenly heard footsteps. It seemed like there were two people walking towards the hold. Their steps were very light, so Hong Qigong knew it was Ouyang Feng and his nephew since nobody else on board had that kind of ability. He thought if those two came to the hold late at night, they must have some evil intentions, like poisoning the food to harm others. He shrank his body and hid curled up among the barrels. He heard the door open quietly, a flame flared, and two people walked in; they stopped right in front of the barrels. Hong Qigong's heart skipped a beat, "Are they going to poison the wine?" he wondered inside; but what he heard next turned his heart cold.

"Have you placed oil, firewood and sulfur in each cabin?" he heard Ouyang Feng ask.

Ouyang Ke laughed, "Everything is ready; as soon as we start the fire this boat will turn into ashes and the stinky Beggar will be scorched to death instantly."

"They are going to burn the boat?" Hong Qigong was shocked.

"We must wait a little bit longer," Ouyang Feng said, "As soon as that kid named Guo falls asleep you go to the life boat; just be really careful not to wake the Old Beggar up. I'll come here and light the fire."

"What are we going to do with the maidservants and the snake herders?" Ouyang Ke asked.

"The stinky Beggar is a great master of this age; it's worthy of his reputation to sacrifice some people to accompany him



in death," Ouyang Feng said coldly.

While they talked their hands were not idle; they unplugged a barrel and the smell of oil reached Hong Qigong's nose. It turned out the barrels were full of vegetable oil. Ouyang Feng and his nephew also took some sulfur from a stack of wooden boxes, some firewood and sacks of wood shavings from the shelves, then scattered them on the floor.

Not too long afterwards they'd finished their job and turned around to go when Ouyang Ke laughed and said, "Uncle, in less than twelve hours that Guo kid will be buried at sea and the only person who knows the 'Nine Yin Manual' will be you."

"No, there will be two. Won't I pass it on to you?" Ouyang Feng replied. Ouyang Ke was delighted; he closed the door with the back of his hand.

Hong Qigong was furious and shocked at the same time, he thought, "If there was no ghost or spirit urging me to steal some wine how would I have found out about the two's treacherous plan? When the boat suddenly caught fire, how would I've escaped the disaster?" When he could not hear the footsteps of those two anymore, he carefully snuck out and went back to his own cabin. Guo Jing had already come back and was sleeping soundly on the bed. He was about to wake him and discuss what they were going to do when there was a slight rustling noise outside the door. He knew it must be Ouyang Feng checking to see if they were sound asleep, so he pretended to talk in his sleep, "Good wine! Good wine! I want ten more pots!"

Ouyang Feng was startled, at first thinking the Old Beggar was still awake, drinking wine; but then Hong Qigong called out loudly again, "Old Poison, let us fight for another thousand stances ... (giggling) ... Good boy! That was

awesome!" Standing outside the door Ouyang Feng listened to him speaking nonsense. He was confused for a while, then realized that Hong Qigong was talking in his sleep. "The stinky Beggar's death is imminent, yet he still drinks and fights in his dreams," he thought.

As Hong Qigong's mouth talked nonsense, his ears listened attentively. Ouyang Feng's lightness kungfu was superb, but Hong Qigong was still able to hear him walking towards the port side of the boat. Hong Qigong put his mouth on Guo Jing's ear and lightly shook his shoulder, "Jing'er!" he whispered.

"Mmm!" Guo Jing mumbled as he awoke.

"Just follow my lead and don't ask any questions," Hong Qigong said urgently, "Get out quietly and make sure nobody's watching you."

Guo Jing rolled over and crawled quietly towards the door. Hong Qigong silently opened the door and, tugging Guo Jing's sleeve, they moved towards the starboard side. He was afraid they would be detected by Ouyang Feng, so instead of jumping he climbed over the rail. With his left hand holding onto the rail his right hand pulled Guo Jing along; both of them hung outside the boat. Guo Jing thought it was strange, but did not dare to make any sounds. Hong Qigong slowly released his hands from the rail and quietly crawled downwards keeping his eyes on Guo Jing fearing that the boat was too slippery for him. Should he fall, he would surely make noise.

The boat was smoothly painted, plus, it was wet and they were going downwards to where the boat sloped towards the water. The boat was moving in waves making the boat rock, so climbing down was not an easy matter. Luckily Guo Jing had been trained by Ma Yu to go up and down the cliff

everyday on the Steppe; plus, his skills had been improved tremendously this past year or so. He would stick his fingers in between the wooden planks or grab the head of a nail or find a crack somewhere and slowly but steadily moved down.

Half of Hong Qigong's body was already in the water. He moved towards the stern with Guo Jing following close behind. His target was the small life boat tied on a rope behind the boat. "Get on that boat!" he told Guo Jing. He loosened his grip and released his body from the big boat.

The big boat was traveling quite fast, so only a second later Hong Qigong grabbed the edge of the small boat. Swinging with his hands his body somersaulted and landed in the small boat without making a sound. After Guo Jing followed his example he quietly said, "Cut the rope." Guo Jing took out his dagger and a moment later the small boat was floating free on the ocean waves. Hong Qigong pulled the oars to get them some distance from the big boat. A moment later the big boat disappeared into the darkness.

Suddenly flames were seen on the big boat's stern coming from the torch in Ouyang Feng's hand. Ouyang Feng could be heard shouting in alarm because the small life boat was nowhere to be seen. He sounded shocked, angry and afraid at the same time. Hong Qigong concentrated his 'qi' in the 'dan tian' region and let out a long laugh.

Out of nowhere another boat appeared, heading rapidly towards the starboard side of the big boat. Hong Qigong wondered, "Uh, whose boat is that?" Before he finished speaking a pair of white eagles came down from the sky, circling the big boat's main sail. Someone dressed in white could be seen leaving the incoming boat and leaping towards the big boat. In the bright starlight one could see

the glimmer of a golden hair band on her head. "Rong'er!" Guo Jing gasped.

The person leaping onto the big boat was indeed Huang Rong. Just before leaving Peach Blossom Island she saw the little red horse galloping from the forest, she thought, "This little red horse is useless on the sea, but those two eagles would actually be able to help me find Jing ge ge." So she whistled loudly to call the white eagles to her.

Eagles' eyes are sharp and they can fly extremely fast. On this boundless sea they unexpectedly found Guo Jing on the big boat. Huang Rong was alarmed, but also pleasantly surprised to find the 'in danger' message Guo Jing had tied on the eagles' leg; she immediately let the eagles soar in the sky and steered the boat to follow them. Eventually her boat caught up with the big boat, but she was a little bit too late, Hong Qigong and Guo Jing had already left the big boat.

Huang Rong had not forgotten the 'in danger' message she got earlier and she was afraid she might be too late; as soon as the eagles circled above this boat, she ordered her crew to sail alongside. As soon as the distance was manageable she leaped onto the big boat with a butterfly steel projectile in her hand, only to see Ouyang Ke pacing around nervously, like an ant on a hot pot.

"Where is Guo Jing?" Huang Rong shouted, "What did you do to him?"

Ouyang Feng had lit the fire in the hold and was planning to escape using the small life boat when he suddenly saw the boat was gone. Perspiration ran down his forehead like beads or pearls when he heard Hong Qigong's loud and long laugh. He silently cursed his own stupidity because instead of harming others he was harming himself; of

course he was very anxious. Then Huang Rong suddenly arrived on a boat and he rushed to grab this opportunity, "Quickly seize that boat!" he shouted.

The crew of Huang Rong's boat was deaf mute servants from the island. As long as Huang Rong was on board, they followed her commands out of fear; as soon as Huang Rong left the boat, they immediately turned the boat around, hoisted the sail and escaped as fast as they could.

Not long after Hong Qigong and Guo Jing saw Huang Rong jump onto the big boat, the fire in the hold was starting to reach the deck. Guo Jing, unaware of what had happened, called out in alarm, "Fire...fire!"

"That's right," Hong Qigong said, "The Old Poison set the boat on fire to burn the two of us to death."

Guo Jing had a blank expression on his face as he excitedly said, "We must save Rong'er!"

"Let's go back to the boat!" Hong Qigong said. With all his might Guo Jing pulled the oars. The big boat had also changed its direction to approach the small life boat. The deck was full of male snake herders and female maidservants running around frantically, shouting for help. Hong Qigong had to raise his voice to be heard, "Rong'er! Jing'er and I are here! Swim over quickly!"

On the sea the mighty waves rolled, the night was dark, so it was a very dangerous time to swim. But Hong Qigong knew Huang Rong's water skills were excellent and it was also a critical moment, so he was compelled to take this risk.

When Huang Rong heard her master's voice, she was delighted. No longer paying attention to Ouyang Feng and his nephew she rushed to the boat's side and jumped into

the water below. Suddenly she felt something was holding her back. Huang Rong turned her head in great surprise to see her right wrist in Ouyang Feng's hand. "Let me go!" she shouted, sending her left fist toward Ouyang Feng's face; the result was, both of her wrists were in Ouyang Feng's hands.

Ouyang Feng saw the boat that brought Huang Rong had already far away, too far for them to pursue and the big boat they were on was already ablaze. The main mast was burning and about to fall and things on deck were extremely chaotic; the boat would sink at any minute. His only hope now was the small life boat in Hong Qigong's control; so he shouted loudly, "Stinky Beggar! Miss Huang is in my hands; do you see her?" He lifted Huang Rong high in the air.

By that time the sea was lit bright red from the fire on the boat. Hong Qigong and Guo Jing could see her clearly. Hong Qigong was very indignant, "Again he uses a dirty trick to get this boat. Humph! I am going to get Rong'er back."

Guo Jing saw the boat was nearly burnt to the rails, "I am coming too!" he said.

"No! You stay and guard this boat; don't let the Old Poison take it away," Hong Qigong said.

"All right!" Guo Jing said and exerted his strength pulling the oars. By that time the big boat was motionless on the sea's surface, so with several pulls they had come close to the big boat.

Hong Qigong kicked the small boat and his body flew toward the big boat. Stretching his left hand he grabbed the boat's rail with his strong fingers and then catapulted his body upward and somersaulted to the deck.

Ouyang Feng was still holding Huang Rong's wrists; "Stinky Beggar, what do you want?" he said, smiling ferociously.

Hong Qigong cursed him silently, "Come...let us fight another one thousand stances." 'Swish...swish...swish!' He sent three palm attacks towards Ouyang Feng's face. Ouyang Feng was shrewd; he pushed Huang Rong's body forward as a shield, forcing Hong Qigong to retract his attack. Ouyang Feng had sealed Huang Rong's acupoints, so she was paralyzed.

Hong Qigong shouted loudly, "Old Poison, you are shameless! Quickly unseal her and let her go; you and I will fight here to decide victory or defeat."

How could Ouyang Feng release his prisoner so easily? Then he noticed his nephew was continuously being pushed backwards by the fire; he threw Huang Rong towards him and called out, "Go to the small boat!"

Ouyang Ke caught Huang Rong and looked downward to see Guo Jing waiting in the small boat below. He thought the small boat was too small. If he jumped down carrying someone, he might cause the boat to turn over, so he found a thick rope. After tying it to a mast he used his right hand to slide down onto the small boat while holding Huang Rong with his left.

Guo Jing was relieved to see Huang Rong on the small boat but he did not know that Huang Rong's acupoints were sealed. His attention was focused on his master and Ouyang Feng fighting a fierce battle on the blazing deck. He was so worried about his master's safety that his gaze was fixed on the fight and he forgot to speak to Huang Rong.

Both Hong Qigong and Ouyang Feng demonstrated their excellence in martial arts while leaping around to avoid falling wood and ropes. They attacked and counterattacked

each other. Hong Qigong had a slight advantage in that his body was still wet from swimming to the small boat earlier, while Ouyang Feng's clothes and hair had caught fire here and there.

The two's martial arts were at par to begin with and a slight advantage was enough for Hong Qigong to gain the upper hand. Ouyang Feng was forced to step back bit by bit until his back was very close to the cabin and his clothes and beard started to catch fire. He wanted to jump into the sea, but Hong Qigong did not give him any slack. If he tried to jump and thus diverted his attention from the fight, he might be seriously injured or even worse, killed. Ouyang Feng became very anxious and it seemed like defeat was imminent.

Hong Qigong also realized that he would certainly win this time and that boosted his confidence. But then another thought came into his mind, "If I forced him to enter the fire and die, that won't do my plan any good. He has obtained the 'Nine Yin Altered Manual' from Jing'er and he won't die satisfied until he practices that manual. Why don't I let him off this time?" Thereupon he laughed and said, "Old Poison, I let you off this time, quickly jump into the boat."

Ouyang Feng looked at him strangely, then turning his body he jumped into the sea. Hong Qigong was about to follow when Ouyang Feng suddenly flew back up. "Hold on! Now that my body is also wet, we are on level ground. Let us fight again to decide victory or defeat." Holding onto the boat's rail he swung his body up and landed on the deck.

"Wonderful! Wonderful!" Hong Qigong said, "I'm having a very satisfying fight today!" He sent his fist forward, and the two engaged in a fierce battle one more time.



“Rong’er, do you see how fierce the Old Poison is?” Guo Jing asked. Huang Rong’s acupoint was still sealed, so of course she was not able to answer. “Do you think I should go up there and help Master? The boat is about to sink,” Guo Jing said. There still was no answer from Huang Rong. Guo Jing turned his head to see Ouyang Ke hugging Huang Rong; he became angry and shouted, “Take your hands off her!”

After great difficulty Ouyang Ke was finally able to touch Huang Rong’s hands; how could he let go that easily? Smiling he said, “If you move, I am going to bash her brains out with my palm.”

Guo Jing did not even think; he swept the oar in his hand horizontally. Ouyang Ke ducked to avoid this attack, but Guo Jing sent his palm with a whistling sound toward his head. Ouyang Ke was forced to let Huang Rong go and swung his head backwards to avoid this attack. Guo Jing’s fists moved simultaneously, one downward, the other upward, both aimed at Ouyang Ke’s head.

Ouyang Ke realized this small boat was not the best place to fight while his enemy attacked fiercely. He stood up and sent a stance from his ‘Spirit Snake Fist technique’ [ling she quan], his hand swept horizontally. Guo Jing extended his left arm to parry, but suddenly Ouyang Ke’s fist curved upward turning into a palm that slapped Guo Jing hard on his cheek.

This blow was very hard and Guo Jing’s head was spinning because of it; but he realized the danger and he opened his eyes to see the second attack coming. Ouyang Ke’s movement resembled a wine gourd with two bends. Guo Jing avoided this attack by throwing his head backwards while sending his right arm forward to counterattack. Because his head was moving backwards, his attack was not effective. Luckily he had learned the ‘Mutual Hands

Combat technique' from Zhou Botong, so both his left and right hands could move independently of each other. This time his left hand followed his right with a different stance heading at his opponent. Because Ouyang Ke's hand was still coming towards Guo Jing, Guo Jing's arms surrounded his hand. Ouyang Ke's right arm happened to get caught in between Guo Jing's hands and as the left hand was pulling inwards and the right was pushing outwards. With a crack one of Ouyang Ke's arm bones was broken.

Actually Ouyang Ke's martial arts skill was not much below those of Ma Yu, Wang Chuyi or Sha Tongtian. No matter which technique he used, he should be able to defeat Guo Jing in a fair battle. Because Guo Jing's techniques were more bizarre than any other techniques he had seen before, he suffered under Guo Jing's hands twice. Ouyang Ke fell onto the small boat's deck.

Guo Jing did not pursue his attack on his opponent; instead he quickly took Huang Rong's yielding body and unsealed her acupoint. Luckily for him that when Ouyang Feng sealed her acupoint, he did not use too much energy; he was trying to conserve his energy because he'd anticipated Hong Qigong's attack. Guo Jing would not have been able to unseal the Western Poison's acupoint sealing otherwise.

Huang Rong came to her senses, "Quickly help Shifu!" she called out.

Guo Jing lifted his head to see his master and Ouyang Feng engaged in close hand-to-hand combat and looked like they were dancing in the midst of the blazing fire. The sound of the winds generated by their movements was intermingled with the sounds of cracking and debris falling over them. Suddenly a loud crack was heard as the boat's back broke; the stern slowly sank into the sea and vanished in the dark water. The bow was lighter, but slowly sank as well. Guo

Jing took his oar and started paddling to get the small boat closer with the intention of helping his master.

Hong Qigong's feet hit the water first. His clothes had been dried out by the fire, while Ouyang Feng's were still wet from jumping into the sea earlier. This time the Western Poison had gained the upper hand over the Northern Beggar. Hong Qigong did not want to surrender so easily, so he fought with all his might. At that moment the main mast broke and fell. The two hurriedly jumped backwards so they were separated by the burning mast.

Ouyang Feng fetched his snake staff and jumped over the burning mast. Hong Qigong immediately drew the bamboo stick from his waist and fended off the attack. They had been fighting ferociously barehanded before, so imagine how fierce the battle had become now that both were wielding weapons.

Guo Jing held the oar in his hands, ready to jump on board. He was very concerned about his master's safety, yet watching the two's wonderful weapon techniques he was carried away, clucking his tongue and praising them unceasingly.

There is a saying among martial arts practitioners, "A hundred days to master a saber, a thousand days to master a spear, ten thousand days to master a sword," indicating that sword techniques were the most difficult to learn. However, when martial artists reached perfection, each would develop his/her own unique skill and the difference between various weapons would become minuscule. Twenty years ago during the Sword Meet of Mount Hua both Hong Qigong and Ouyang Feng already admired each other's martial arts very much. Even using swords it was very difficult for one to defeat the other. Now neither used the sword any longer.

Hong Qigong wielded a bamboo stick which he carried anywhere he went as the symbol of authority of his position as the Beggar Clan Leader. The bamboo was pliable but hard to break. Compared to a sword it was about one foot longer. His skill in external martial arts was superb; he was able to impart an incredible amount of strength to the flexible weapon in his hands, increasing its might tremendously.

Ouyang Feng's snake staff was also unique in that he'd combined the cudgel, stick, and spear techniques; the movements were complicated. The staff's head was carved in the form of a human head; its mouth grinned ferociously, looking very scary. The two rows of sharp teeth inside its mouth were covered with poison. The head danced around like a ghost ready to strike its victim. On top of that, there was a hidden button on the staff that, when pressed, would shoot some poison towards the enemy. If that wasn't enough, fiercer still were the two snakes wrapped around the staff. They were alive and able to make unpredictable moves and were very difficult to guard against.

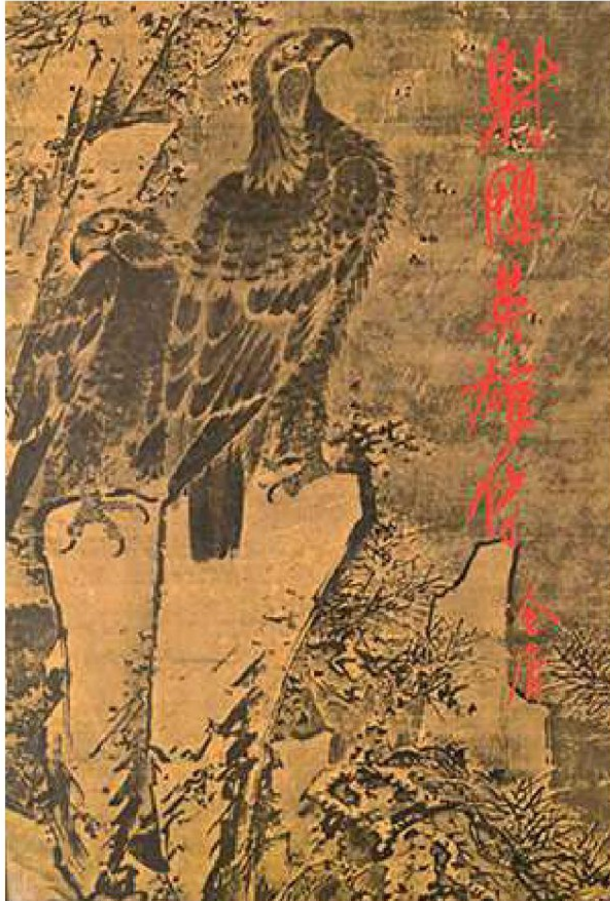
The two exchanged palms and weapons, displaying their respective unique skills. Ouyang Feng had a slight advantage in terms of weaponry, but Hong Qigong was the leader of beggars everywhere and beggars were experts in catching snakes. His bamboo stick danced amidst the snake staff movements and parried every move that came his way. He also took advantage of any opening in his opponent's offense and struck at the snake staff's vital point. Ouyang Feng moved his staff very quickly, making it difficult for his opponent to take accurate aim; he knew Hong Qigong meant to kill the snakes on his staff. He did not activate the secret button on his staff for fear that his reputation would be ruined.

Hong Qigong still had a unique skill set belonging to the Beggar Clan, namely the 'Dog Beating Stick technique' [da gou bang], its changes were subtle yet marvelous. It was a very sophisticated stick technique. However, Hong Qigong did not want to use this special skill unless except in an emergency situation. He was planning on using it at the second Sword Meet of Mount Hua the following year and he did not want to let this would-be-contender to have the advantage of watching his moves beforehand.

Guo Jing stood on the bow of the small boat and several times wanted to jump on board to help his master; but the two combatants were fighting closely. He realized his own skill was too far below theirs and it would be very difficult to even get close to them. All he could do was stare blankly, unable to do anything.

End of Book 2

**She Diao Ying Xiong Chuan**  
**Eagle Shooting Hero Book 03**  
by  
**Jin Yong**



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# She Diao Ying Xiong Chuan Eagle Shooting Hero Book 03

by  
**Jin Yong**



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## **Ebook Compiler's note.**

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Unfortunately there does not appear to a large commercial market for English wuxia translations, so we are beholden to fan translators for their efforts to bring the work of Jin Yong, Gu Long et al to an English speaking audience.

Additionally, I would note that the work involved goes far beyond just translation.

Chinese cannot simply be directly translated to English, so am grateful for the notes explaining idioms in addition to notes on geography, culture and historical context.

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## Chapter 21 - The Thousand-catty Rock

Translated by Hugh (aka IcyFox)



*They acted together and used the oak tree as the pivot to pull the crisscross shaped rope formation. The rope became taut and the rock was lifted*

*slowly. The Sun was about to set and the sky was red, illuminating the surface of the water. The tide had already gone out and Ouyang Ke's body was in the mud with his eyes fixed onto the rock. It moved slowly and steadily with a creaking sound, causing him to be anxious yet happy.*

Ouyang Feng felt his surroundings becoming hotter and the deck of the boat was shaking violently; he knew the boat would sink any moment. But Hong Qigong was attacking more furiously and did not slacken his pace; if he did not use his special skills now, he might not get out of this contest alive. He pulled back his Snake Rod with his right hand and kicked out viciously with his right leg.

Hong Qigong used his bamboo rod to chase the Snake Rod while using his left hand to block the incoming kick. Ouyang Feng suddenly twisted his arms and punched towards Hong Qigong's 'Right Sun' Acupoint. This 'Spirit Snake Fist' was developed by Ouyang Feng's own harsh training and was meant for use during the second Mount Hua Tournament. He had not yet used this snake-like boxing skill even after exchanging a thousand strokes with Hong Qigong on Peach Blossom Island.

A snake seems to be boneless and can turn in all directions at will, so the main point of this boxing skill is to be able to twist the arms unpredictably, so that when the opponent blocks the fists, the attacker would be able to throw a punch from an unexpected angle at close proximity. Of course to expect the arms to move exactly like a snake would be unreasonable but to the eyes of the opponent, the movements of the arms greatly resemble the movements of snakes.

With Ouyang Feng executing such a strange move at this critical moment, Hong Qigong should have found it hard to



counter, and even if he wasn't injured, he would still be in danger. However Ouyang Ke had already used the move against Guo Jing, and although he won, he actually gave Hong Qigong a chance to spot a flaw in the move.

That day he did not attend the feast with Li Sheng and the group of beggars but instead thought deeply on how to counter the move. Now that Ouyang Feng finally used this move, he inwardly rejoiced; he extended his fingers to form a claw and caught hold of his fist. His response was perfect and he managed to swiftly and accurately counter this special move of the 'Spirit Snake Fist'.

It looked like it happened by chance, but in reality Hong Qigong had pondered over it for many days and nights and followed it with long hours of practice which finally allowed him to deal with the entire 'Spirit Snake Fist' move. Although it had not been perfected yet, it had the element of surprise and managed to catch Ouyang Feng off guard.

Ouyang Feng had expected Hong Qigong to be greatly surprised and be rendered helpless, allowing him to seize the opportunity and move in for the kill. Unexpectedly it was he who ended up surprised and forced to retreat several steps. Suddenly a mass of fire descended upon him, immediately covering his body. Hong Qigong was also startled; he leapt back and saw that it was actually a large sail which had caught fire and fallen.

Normally with Ouyang Feng's level of martial arts, even had that sail fallen several times faster, it would not have hit him. But he had just seen the 'Spirit Snake Fist', which he painstakingly created over many years, unexpectedly and casually neutralized; he was stunned and he did not even attempt to evade the burning sail. The sail, along with the mast, weighed several hundred jin and Ouyang Feng was not able to lift the sail even after jumping twice. Although

he was in great danger, he was still calm; he tried to raise the Snake Rod to lift the sail, but the Snake Rod was pinned under the mast and could not be lifted. In his heart he sighed, "Forget it! I'll return to heaven today!" Suddenly he felt the weight lifting and his head was no longer covered by the sail. He saw that Hong Qigong had raised the anchor, hooked it onto the sail and pulled the sail away. Hong Qigong did not want to see him being burned alive so he went to save him.

By now Ouyang Feng's clothes and brows were on fire and he immediately rolled on the deck of the boat frantically attempting to put out the fire. Unfortunately bad things do not come singly and the boat suddenly lurched to one side, causing a huge chain to sweep right into him.

Hong Qigong shouted, "Ah!" and dashed forward to grab the chain. The chain had been heated by the fire and caused a sizzling sound when it came into contact with his hand, burning his palm. He quickly let it go as he threw it into the sea. He was just about to jump from the boat when he felt a slight numbness in his back. He stopped for a second and a thought flashed through his mind, "I saved West Poison's life, can it be possible that he's using his snake to poison me?" He turned around and saw that it was indeed a snake and it had fresh blood in its mouth. Enraged, he threw two palms towards Ouyang Feng. Ouyang Feng casually stepped aside and Hong Qigong's palms hit a mast, splitting it in two.

Ouyang Feng was happy that his sneak attack worked but when he saw Hong Qigong lashing out crazily he became more serious and did not dare take the blows head-on, avoiding them instead. Guo Jing shouted, "Master! Climb aboard the small boat." Hong Qigong suddenly felt dizzy and staggered.

Ouyang Feng charged forward and struck out with his palms which landed on Hong Qigong's back. Ouyang Feng's lethal snake poison was unmatched, but fortunately he already used up most of the poison when he made the bet with Zhou Botong days ago, so today the poison was not as lethal. When Hong Qigong was bitten, he was not severely poisoned and because of his high internal energy, the poison took some time to take effect. When he was hit by Ouyang Feng he was in a daze and he did not circulate his qi to protect himself. The blow caused him to throw up blood and collapse.

Since Hong Qigong was very highly-skilled, Ouyang Feng knew that this blow would not kill him; when he recovered some time later, Ouyang Feng would be in trouble. He jumped over and raised his foot to strike his chest. Guo Jing had just climbed aboard from the small boat and saw that the situation was very urgent and he might not be able to save Hong Qigong in time. So he struck out with both palms using the 'Twin Dragons Fetch Water' stance to attack Ouyang Feng's waist.

Although Ouyang Feng knew his martial arts were not weak, he did not think very highly of him and used his left hand to block the strike while his right foot slammed down. Guo Jing was shocked and did not care about his own safety; he jumped forward to clutch Ouyang Feng's head. By doing this he left his acupoints exposed and his side was swept at by Ouyang Feng.

Although this counterattack was not very forceful, every one of his strikes was enough to kill his opponent. If not for Guo Jing's good internal strength, he would have suffered serious injuries. He felt a sharp pain followed by numbness in half his body, but he continued to cling tenaciously to Ouyang Feng's head.

Ouyang Feng assumed that with his vicious strike, his opponent would retreat, but he did not expect the dumb kid to use a move that could get both of them injured. He had to retract the foot which was halfway to Hong Qigong in order to twist his body around to attack Guo Jing. In such close proximity, he could not execute any of his refined 'Snake' moves.

Whenever highly-skilled martial artists fight, they will not allow their opponent to get close to them even if they were targeting acupoints. There was hardly any close-contact grappling involved. When it came to advanced martial arts, there were no moves for scuffling.

Ouyang Feng felt his throat being gripped forcefully by Guo Jing and he struck out backwards, but Guo Jing managed to avoid the blows. It was becoming harder for him to breathe and he felt the grip was becoming tighter, so he jabbed his elbow backwards. Guo Jing evaded to the right and had to let go with his left hand, but at the same time used his legs to execute a Mongolian wrestling technique while his left hand slipped past Ouyang Feng's shoulder.

He slammed down forcefully on Ouyang Feng's back, causing Ouyang Feng to suffer intense pain even with his high level martial arts. This technique was called the 'Camel's Pull', and it was so effective that only a wrestling expert could deal with it. Ouyang Feng did not know wrestling, so he suffered the full extent of the strike.

Guo Jing was happy and his right hand released its grip and slipped upwards behind Ouyang Feng's back. With a loud yell he pressed both palms down. In Mongolian wrestling this move was called the 'Mountain Breaking Move' and was used when the opponent had fallen, so that no matter how strong his shoulders were or how good his wrestling

techniques were, there would be nothing much he could do as his shoulder would break if he tried to move.

However Ouyang Feng's martial arts were much better than the Mongolian wrestlers, so even with such a disadvantage he still managed to think of a way to turn defeat into victory. When Guo Jing's hands came down, he used his qinggong [lightness kungfu] to duck aside and rolled away under Guo Jing's waist.

With his status as a highly skilled martial arts master, rolling under a junior's waist was a great disgrace, but that did not bother him. He broke free from the 'Mountain Breaking Move' and immediately threw his fists at Guo Jing's back to counterattack. He did not expect that before his fists reached Guo Jing, his left leg was immobilized. Guo Jing knew he was no match for his opponent, but in a close-combat situation and with his wrestling background, coupled with the fact that he had no regard for his own safety, Ouyang Feng could not get closer to his master to injure him further. At this point the fire became fiercer and the planks twisted, causing them to lose their balance, fall and their clothes to catch fire.

Huang Rong was worried sick and anxious as she saw Hong Qigong's motionless body slumped at the side of the boat; she could not tell if he was dead or alive. Meanwhile Guo Jing and Ouyang Feng were still rolling and struggling without showing any signs of stopping. Their clothes were on fire and the situation was getting dangerous, so she lifted the oar and swung it at Ouyang Ke's head. Although his right arm was broken, his martial arts were still good enough for him to evade the oar and stretch out his left hand to grab Huang Rong's bracelet. Huang Rong stomped her feet fiercely and the small boat almost capsized. Ouyang Ke could not swim and he was about to fall overboard, so he had to let go of Huang Rong. When the

boat stabilized, Huang Rong took the opportunity to jump into the sea.

She swam quickly towards the big boat. The boat was already half submerged and the deck was almost touching the water's surface. Huang Rong climbed aboard to help Guo Jing and took out the 'Emei Sting' from her waist. [The Emei Sting is a spike-like weapon which is pointed on each end and has a finger-ring in the middle] Guo Jing and Ouyang Feng were locked in a bundle and rolling about. Ouyang Feng's martial arts were better and he managed to pin Guo Jing beneath him, but Guo Jing tenaciously held on to his shoulders, preventing him from counterattacking. Huang Rong fought through the smoke, went up to Ouyang Feng, and pierced his back with the spike.

Ouyang Feng was struggling madly with Guo Jing, but when he felt the prick, he was surprised and twisted around forcefully, causing Guo Jing to land on top. Huang Rong now wanted to poke Ouyang Feng's head with the spike, but Ouyang Feng's agility allowed him to evade her attacks and she ended up jabbing the spike into the deck.

A gust of wind blew some thick black smoke her way causing her eyes to burn. Just as she was about to rub her eyes she suddenly felt a pain in her leg and fell. Ouyang Feng had kicked her. Huang Rong rolled over and jumped up, but her hair caught fire. She was about to attack him again when Guo Jing shouted, "Save Master first!" Huang Rong silently agreed and ran towards Hong Qigong, grabbed him and jumped into the sea, extinguishing the flames on her body.

Huang Rong placed Hong Qigong on her back, kicked her legs in the water, and swam to the small boat. Ouyang Ke stood at the side of the boat and raised the oar high, shouting, "Put the old beggar down; I'll only let you alone

board!" Huang Rong said, "Fine! Let's meet in the water!" She shook the boat violently. The boat rocked and seemed about to capsize. Ouyang Ke became frantic and gripped the side of the boat tightly, saying, "Don't... don't shake it, the boat is going to overturn!"

Huang Rong laughed as she said, "Pull my master up quickly. And watch out...if you try any tricks, I'll dump you in the water for six hours." Ouyang Ke had no choice but to comply and took hold of Hong Qigong, pulling him onboard.

Huang Rong smiled and praised him, "Since I first met you, this is the first good deed you've done." Ouyang Ke's heart stirred and he wanted to speak, but could not open his mouth. Huang Rong was about to swim back to the large boat to help out in the fight when she suddenly heard a thunderous rumble - a huge wall of water loomed over her head.

She was shocked and quickly held her breath, waiting for the water to hit the boat, but when she looked again her jaw dropped. A whirlpool had formed on the surface of the sea and the burning boat had disappeared together with Guo Jing and Ouyang Feng.

At this moment, her mind went completely blank and she could not feel or think of anything. She'd become completely lost, not knowing where she was. Suddenly, salty water filled her mouth and she found herself sinking. She jerked and her senses awoke as she swam upwards. When she broke the surface, all she could see in any direction was the small boat; everything else had disappeared under the waves. Huang Rong dived under the water again and struggled to go deeper. Her swimming skills were fantastic and her strokes were powerful, but she could only swim along with the current. She covered the entire area searching for Guo Jing but he had disappeared without a

trace. Even Ouyang Feng could not be found – it seemed they had gone down with the boat.

After some time, she was completely exhausted, but she refused to give up, and swam about wildly. She could only hope Heaven would be merciful and let her bump into Guo Jing, but she was surrounded by mountainous waves and there was no trace of him. She had been swimming for over an hour now and could not continue any longer, so she headed towards the small boat, intending to rest for a while before resuming the search.

Ouyang Ke pulled her up. He knew that his uncle was missing and was equally anxious, asking, “Have you seen my uncle?” Huang Rong was too exhausted and she suddenly saw everything go black as she fainted. After some time she slowly regained consciousness but felt like her body was afloat, as though she was floating among the clouds while the sounds of the winds and waves beat against her ears. She sat upright and realized that the boat was just following the currents.

By now they did not know how far they were from the sunken boat and Guo Jing could not be found. Huang Rong felt great sadness and fainted again. Ouyang Ke could only grip the sides of the small boat tightly as he feared that the next wave would send him tumbling out of the boat into the water.

After another hour, Huang Rong awoke again and thought that since her Jing ge ge was at the bottom of the sea, it was meaningless for her to live on. When she saw Ouyang Ke’s twitching eyes and his pale lips, she felt disgusted and thought, “How can I possibly die together with this beast?” She stood up and snapped, “Jump overboard!” Ouyang Ke was shocked and exclaimed, “What?” Huang Rong said,



“You’re not jumping? Let me capsize the boat then we shall speak again.”

She jumped towards the right, causing a reaction which resulted in the boat springing to the left. She then jumped towards the left, and the boat rocked even more violently. When she heard Ouyang Ke’s frantic shouting, her sadness became joy and she jumped again.

Ouyang Ke knew that if she jumped a few more times, the boat would definitely capsize. When he saw her jump again, he quickly jumped to the other side. They landed exactly at the same time and their forces cancelled out, causing the boat to momentarily dip deeper into the water.

Huang Rong repeated this trick twice, but he managed to stop her. Huang Rong said, “Good! I’ll make a hole in the boat and see what you can do then.” She took out the steel spike and jumped to the middle of the boat, but then she saw Hong Qigong lying motionless in the bottom of the boat. She realized that she had completely forgotten about her master as she yearned for Guo Jing. She hurriedly bent down to place a finger by his nose and she felt his faint breathing. She was relieved and supported Hong Qigong in her arms. His eyes were tightly closed, his face was white as sheet, and his pulse was weak. Huang Rong became worried about her master and no longer worried about Ouyang Ke, so she loosened his shirt to check his injury.

Suddenly the boat trembled violently and Ouyang Ke shouted excitedly, “Land ahead...land ahead!” Huang Rong lifted her head and saw a dense cluster of trees in the distance. The boat had now stopped moving since it was grounded on a reef.

They were still some distance from shore but they could see the sea bed; the depth was only waist-high. Ouyang Ke

jumped into the water and ran a few steps forward before turning back to look at Huang Rong, then he headed back. Huang Rong saw that Hong Qigong's shoulder had a black handprint which seemed to be quite deep and she could not help but think, "How could Western Poison's palm strike be so powerful?"

Then she noticed two fine teeth marks on his shoulder. If she had not looked carefully, she would have missed them. She pressed them lightly with her fingers and suddenly felt a sharp pain in her hand, so she hastily withdrew them and asked, "Master! How are you now?" Hong Qigong moaned but did not answer her. Huang Rong said to Ouyang Ke, "Give me the medicine."

Ouyang Ke threw up his hands impatiently and said, "The antidote is with my uncle." Huang Rong said, "I don't believe it." Ouyang Ke said, "Search me." He undid his outer gown and emptied his stuff onto his hand. Huang Rong saw that there was indeed no medicine and said, "Help me get Master ashore!"

Each took one of Hong Qigong's arms and placed it over their shoulders. Huang Rong held Ouyang Ke's hand, allowing Hong Qigong to sit on their forearms. Then they proceeded to the shore. Huang Rong felt her master shivering continuously and was extremely worried. Ouyang Ke, on the other hand, was rather pleased since he was only aware of the warm and smooth hand holding his, something he could only dream of before. Unfortunately for him, it was not long before they reached the shore.

Huang Rong crouched and lowered Hong Qigong to the ground and said, "Quick, get the boat ashore, don't let the tide sweep it out to sea." Ouyang Ke released her hand and stared blankly, only vaguely hearing Huang Rong's voice but not paying attention to what she was saying. Luckily

Huang Rong did not know what he was thinking and stared at him while repeating what she'd said. Ouyang Ke then dragged the boat ashore and saw that Huang Rong had rolled Hong Qigong over, letting him lie on the grass so that she could give him first aid. Then he thought, "Where on Earth are we?"

He ran up a small hill, looked around, and could not help but be surprised and extremely pleased. In every direction was the vast sea; they were on a remote island. The island was filled with lush greenery but there were no signs of human life. He was surprised that there were no signs of food or accommodation; how would they survive? On the other hand, he was pleased because it seemed as though he was fated to be on this deserted island with that angel-like beauty. With the old beggar seriously injured, he would not bother them. He thought, "With her here, this god-forsaken island is like a paradise; even if I die, I will die happy."

When he thought of this he unconsciously spread his arms, but suddenly felt a sharp pain in his right arm which reminded him that it was broken. He broke off two branches, tore a strip of cloth and tied his arm to the makeshift splint. Huang Rong was at that time trying to suck out the poison from her master's back. She did not know how else she could help him so she let him lie down on a rock in a cave and shouted to Ouyang Ke, "Go look around and see if there's an inn around here."

Ouyang Ke laughed, "This is an island and there's absolutely no inn here. Let's see if we're lucky enough to find anyone else here." Huang Rong was slightly shocked and said, "You do that." When Ouyang Ke heard her instructions he was very excited and utilized his qinggong running to the east; but all he saw were more trees and no traces of human beings. Along the way he killed two wild

hares and then headed north before making his way back in a loop. He told Huang Rong, "It's a deserted island."

That night Huang Rong did not dare sleep for fear of Ouyang Ke attacking them and also because of her anxiety for Hong Qigong. It was only at dawn the following morning that she caught a few hours of sleep. In her sleep she dreamed that Hong Qigong called her several times and she was jolted awake and asked, "Master, how are you?" Hong Qigong pointed at his mouth and moved his jaws. Huang Rong laughed and took some of the unfinished rabbit meat from the previous night and fed him.

Once he'd consumed the meat, he felt the Qi stirring within him and he sat upright in order to breathe properly. Huang Rong did not dare utter a word and only scrutinized his expression. But she watched the reddish tint of his face turn pale, then red again. This cycle repeated several times and soon his head was emitting a steamy mist and sweat fell like rain as his body shivered violently. Suddenly there was the flicker of a shadow... Ouyang Ke was trying to come into the cave.

Huang Rong knew that her master was attempting to treat his own injuries, which was a life-and-death situation; if he forced his way in and distracted her master, nothing would save him. She softly snapped, "Get out now!" Ouyang Ke laughed, "Let's discuss how we can survive on this deserted island. The days will get longer from now on, you know!" Hong Qigong blinked and asked, "Is this really a deserted island?" Huang Rong said, "Master, please concentrate, ignore him." She turned to Ouyang Ke and said, "Come, let's talk outside." Ouyang Ke was elated and followed her out of the cave.

The weather was good this day, but Huang Rong only saw the edge of the vast sea meeting the sky; apart from a few

clouds, there was nothing else. She walked to their landing site and was shocked, and asked, "Where's the boat?" Ouyang Ke said, "Huh, where is it? It must have been swept away by the currents! Ah, damn it!"

Huang Rong saw his expression and deduced that it was he who pushed the boat out to sea so that she could not get away from here. She felt that this was absolutely despicable. Since Guo Jing's apparent death, she had no intention of living. Besides, the small boat would not be able to make it through the fierce waves which made the situation bleak. In any case she would not be able to get her master to safety. She stared at Ouyang Ke without showing any change in expression. In her heart she was actually thinking of how she could kill him and save her master at the same time. Huang Rong jumped onto a large rock and looked into the distance. Ouyang Ke thought, "If I don't use this chance to get close to her, then when can I?" He also leapt up on the rock and waited for her to sit down. After some time, when she did not appear angry and did not shift her position, he moved closer and said, "Little sister, the two of us can live here until we're old and live like the deities. I must have done something wonderful in my past life to deserve this!"

Huang Rong laughed and said, "This island only has the three of us, including Master, wouldn't we be lonely?" Ouyang Ke thought her tone sounded harmless and was ecstatic, saying, "With me by your side, why would it be lonely? Moreover, when we have children in the future, it will be even less so." Huang Rong laughed, "Who will have the children? I won't." Ouyang Ke laughed, "I'll help you." After saying that, he reached out his hand to take hold of hers. Then he felt warmth in his palm and realized that Huang Rong already held his hand. Ouyang Ke's heart beat madly.

Huang Rong slowly moved her hand up his arm, then said in a low voice, "Sister Mu Nianci's chastity was destroyed by you, was it not?" Ouyang Ke laughed as he said, "That girl did not want to submit to me. What kind of man would I be to force her?" Huang Rong said, "So, it must be others who slander her. Her lover had a big quarrel with her because of it." Ouyang Ke said, "Her reputation suffered because of that, what a pity!"

Huang Rong suddenly pointed to the sea and shouted, "Ah, what is that!" Ouyang Ke looked in that direction and was about to ask where when he suddenly felt his wrist stiffen in her firm grip and his body went numb and he could not move. Huang Rong drew her spike and thrust it towards his abdomen. The distance between them was extremely small and Ouyang Ke was in a state of confusion, coupled with the fact that his arm was immobilized, how could he block it? But all of his training under expert guidance at White Camel Mountain had not been wasted; he suddenly twisted his body and in a split second used his chest to thrust towards Huang Rong's back. Huang Rong evaded him and jumped off the rock, causing the spike to gash his leg and resulting in a deep wound that was almost a foot long.

Ouyang Ke jumped off too and saw her spike. He stood there and grinned, but then he felt terrible pain. He bent over and saw his gown stained with blood and realized that although he barely escaped with his life, he was severely injured. Huang Rong said, "We were talking nicely, so why did you try to bump into me for no reason? I can't be bothered with you now." Then she turned and left. Ouyang Ke was filled with love and hatred, shock and joy, as he stood there in silence.

As Huang Rong walked back to the cave she blamed her poor skills for wasting such a good opportunity and letting him escape. When she went inside she saw Hong Qigong

asleep and a pool of black blood on the cave floor. Startled, she asked, "Master, how are you? Are you better?" Hong Qigong said, "I want wine." Huang Rong was distressed because she did not know where to find wine on this deserted island. Yet she agreed and said, "I'll try to get some. Master, your injury isn't serious, right?" Tears fell as she said that.

Despite having gone through so much, she had not cried. Now that the tears had started she could not control herself, so she buried her head on Hong Qigong's chest and cried her heart out. Hong Qigong stroked her hair and patted her back, trying to console her. The old beggar had roamed Jianghu for many decades but had never had to deal with a crying girl before; he did not know what to do. He could only say, "Good girl, don't cry, Master's here for you. Please don't cry. I don't want the wine anymore."

Huang Rong stopped crying after a while and lifted her head. When she saw that Hong Qigong's clothes were wet with her tears, she smiled and said, "I didn't manage to kill that evil jerk, what a pity!" She then told the whole story to him. Hong Qigong was silent for a moment before saying, "Master is useless now and that 'jerk' is better than you in martial arts. For now you can only pit your wits against him." Huang Rong said, "Master, after resting a few days, you'll recover and take his useless life with one palm, won't that settle it?"

Hong Qigong regretfully said, "I've been poisoned by the poisonous snake as well as Western Poison's deadly palm. I've already used all of my martial abilities to purge the poison but there is some left within me. Even if I survive, my martial arts will be affected. Your master is just another old man without any powerful skills." Huang Rong quickly said, "No, no, Master, you aren't, you aren't!" Hong Qigong said,

"I, the old beggar, have never taken things seriously, but now it has come to this and I can't deny it."

He paused, and then gravely said, "Child, Master has no choice but to request a huge favour from you... it's extremely difficult to accomplish... will you accept?" Huang Rong quickly said, "Yes, yes! Master, tell me." He sighed, and then said, "Our time together as master and disciple has not been long and I didn't get to teach you very much martial arts. Now that you're facing a strong opponent, I have no choice but to thrust a great burden on you, or I will not be at ease."

Huang Rong knew that he was usually carefree and easygoing; but now he was so hesitant that she knew it must be some extremely important responsibility. She said, "Master, please tell me. Your injuries were caused by you trying to help your disciple escape from Peach Blossom Island. Even if I die a horrible death, I can hardly repay you. I'm just afraid I'm too young to carry out your instructions." Hong Qigong happily said, "So you agree to it?" Huang Rong said, "Yes. Please say it."

Hong Qigong stood up unsteadily, cupped his hands, and bowing to the north said, "Ancestors, the Beggar Clan you founded passed to my hands. I am now unfortunately incapable of bringing virtue to our clan. Today the matter is urgent and I have to pass on my responsibilities. May the Ancestors in Heaven bless us, help this child avoid trouble and bring our clan to greater heights." When he finished, he bowed to the north once more. Huang Rong was both shocked and curious when he said that.

Hong Qigong said, "Child, kneel down." Huang Rong knelt down and Hong Qigong took his green bamboo stick and raised it over his head. He saluted it and placed it in her hands. Huang Rong was extremely shocked and said,



“Master, you want me to be the Beggar Clan... the Beggar Clans’...” Hong Qigong said, “Exactly. I am the eighteenth generation Leader of the Beggar Clan, and now you are the nineteenth Leader. Now let’s thank our ancestors.”

At this stage Huang Rong did not dare to disobey and could only imitate Hong Qigong’s actions and bowed with both hands cupped. Hong Qigong suddenly coughed and spat out some phlegm which landed on Huang Rong’s clothing. Huang Rong was secretly sad and thought, “Master’s injuries are indeed serious... he doesn’t even have the strength to spit properly.” However she pretended that nothing was amiss. He sighed, “When the Beggars pay their respects to you in future, there will be a disgusting ritual. Ah, this will be hard on you.”

Huang Rong smiled, thinking, “The beggars are filthy and rough, how could any of that be unexpected?” Hong Qigong drew a deep breath. His face was pale but in his heart it felt as though he had just put down a large rock and he was very pleased. Huang Rong helped him lie down. He said, “Now that you’re the Leader, I am an Elder in the Clan. Although the Elders are respected by the Leader, when there’s something to be done the Leader has to give the order. This rule was laid down by our founders, so you must follow it to the letter. When the Leader issues an order, all the beggars must obey it.”

Huang Rong became depressed and worried, thinking, “We’re on this deserted island and I don’t know how we can return to the Central Plains. Moreover Jing ge ge is dead and I have no desire to live. Now Master suddenly wants me to be some so-called Clan Leader and command all the beggars under the sky; how on Earth am I going to do that?” But when she saw her master’s condition, she did not want to worry him further and could only agree to anything he proposed.

Hong Qigong said, "On the fifteenth day of the seventh month of this year, the four Elders of our Clan will hold a gathering at the lakeside Cave-Courtyard in Yueyang City and hear my announcement of the new Leader. You only need to take the bamboo rod there and they will understand my intentions. Every matter within the Clan will be dealt with by the four Elders, so I can leave it to them. But I have to send you, such an adorable child, into the midst of the filthy beggars; this will be really hard on you."

Then he laughed heartily, but because of his injury he began to cough before he finished laughing. Huang Rong massaged his back for a while until he stopped coughing. Hong Qigong sighed, "This old beggar is really useless now, ah, I don't know when I'll recover. I have to rush into teaching you the 'Dog Beating Skill'." Huang Rong was wondering why this stick skill had such a horrible name. She thought that no matter how fierce a dog might be, she could kill it with one punch. She saw no need to learn this skill, but her master was deadly serious, so she could only agree.

Hong Qigong said, "Although you are now the Clan Leader, you don't have to change your personality; if you want to be playful and mischievous, go ahead and be so. We beggars have no restrictions and we do as we please. If we worried that 'this won't do and that won't do', we might as well be judges or ministers. If you do not think highly of the 'Dog Beating Skill', simply say so!"

Huang Rong laughed, "Disciple is wondering what kind of dog could be so tenacious that it requires a specialized skill to handle it." Hong Qigong said, "Now that you're the head of all the beggars, you'll have to act like one. With your rich dress and your rich girl's attitude, the dog would be only too pleased to listen to you; why would you need to hit it? But if we beggars run into such dogs it's a different story.

The old saying goes: 'the poor not armed with sticks get bullied by dogs'. You have never been poor so you don't know what it's like to be one of them."

Huang Rong clapped and laughed, "Master, you're wrong there!" Hong Qigong was perplexed and asked, "Why?" Huang Rong said, "On the third month of this year, I escaped from Peach Blossom Island to play around, and I disguised myself as a beggar. Whenever there were fierce dogs bothering me, all I had to do is give them a kick and they would scramble away." Hong Qigong said, "Yup, but if the dog is too fierce then you'd have to use a stick to hit it."

Huang Rong thought, "What dog could be so fierce?" Then she realized what he meant and shouted, "Oh yeah, bad guys are dogs too!" Hong Qigong smiled and said, "You're really clever. If..." He wanted to say that Guo Jing would not have known it, but his heart turned sour and he stopped.

When Huang Rong heard him stop in mid-sentence, she understood what he was thinking, felt bitterness in her heart and wanted to cry; but now that Hong Qigong needed her help she seemed all grown-up while Hong Qigong seemed like a youth, so she controlled herself and only turned her head away. The tears, however, fell like pearls.

Hong Qigong was as sad as her and he knew that consoling her was useless, so he talked about serious matters, saying, "The thirty-six moves of the 'Dog Beating Skill' was created by our Ancestors and can only be passed down from one Clan Leader to the next without letting anyone else know about the skill. Our Clan's third Leader far surpassed previous Leaders and he greatly improved this skill. After hundreds of years, when our Clan faces any strong opposition, our Leader would personally come forward and use this skill to defeat our enemies."

Huang Rong began to pay attention and then sighed softly, asking, "Master, when you were fighting with Western Poison on the boat, why didn't you use it?" Hong Qigong said, "This skill is very important to our clan, so even though I didn't use it, he may not have won. Who'd know he could be so despicable as to poison me after I saved his life?" Huang Rong saw that he was becoming depressed, so she tried to distract him and said, "Master, please teach me so that I can kill him to avenge you."

With a stony-faced laugh Hong Qigong picked up a piece of firewood and leaned against the cave wall. He recited the formula and executed the steps, thus passing on all thirty-six moves to her. He knew Huang Rong was extremely intelligent but was afraid that he would not live long, so he passed everything on to her in one shot. Although the name 'Dog Beating Skill' was crude, the changes within were subtle and the techniques profound; it was one of the best martial arts skills ever created. It was therefore the reason that this skill was passed down like a precious heirloom.

Although Huang Rong was very clever, she could only remember the general skills and forgot some of the finer details. How could she understand it in such a short time? After he was done, a sweating Hong Qigong took a deep breath and said, "I didn't teach it well, but... that's all I can do for now." With a groan he collapsed and fainted. Huang Rong was shocked and shouted, "Master...master!" She hurriedly supported him but noticed his limbs were cold and his breathing was weak; he seemed almost beyond hope.

Huang Rong had been severely tried for the past few days but now she could not cry. She listened to his heart beat and found it barely audible so she quickly massaged his chest to aid his breathing. Just at this critical moment she heard noises behind her and a hand reached out to take her

wrist. She was concentrating fully on saving her master and did not even notice when Ouyang Ke entered the cave. Now she ignored the fact that the person behind her was a vicious wolf and quietly said, "Master may not make it; think of something to save him."

When Ouyang Ke heard her plead so sincerely, saw the tears welling up in her eyes and her face looking pitiful, his heart quivered. When he bent down to look at Hong Qigong, he saw that his face was white as sheet and his eyes were rolled up; he felt happier. The distance between Huang Rong and himself was less than half a zhang and he could even feel her breathing and smell her fragrance. A few strands of hair caressed her face and his heart thumped madly until he could no longer restrain himself and he grabbed her by her waist.

Huang Rong was taken aback, struck out with force and took the chance to jump away when he evaded her blow. Ouyang Ke had been afraid of Hong Qigong so he did not dare be disrespectful to Huang Rong; now he saw that Hong Qigong was half dead, so he did not worry any longer and laughed, "Good girl, I normally don't bother about other girls, but for a beauty such as yourself, I'll make an exception; come kiss me."

Then he moved menacingly towards her. Huang Rong was frightened out of her wits and thought, "This is a terrible situation. Looks like I'll be killed here, with some indignities." She took out her needles. Ouyang Ke smiled, used his outer gown as a weapon and even advanced another two steps. Huang Rong waited for him to advance another step before crouching low and dodging to the left.

Ouyang Ke followed her and Huang Rong waved her hand. He waved his long sleeve and blocked the spike. Huang Rong knew that she was like an arrow away from the bow

and anxiously tried to run out of the cave. Ouyang Ke was faster. Huang Rong heard the wind behind her back and knew he was attacking her. She was wearing the soft armour so she was not afraid of that and furthermore she was prepared to die, but she wanted to injure him first, so she did not defend herself and even sent a strike towards his chest.

Ouyang Ke did not intend to injure her and his strike was only meant to tire her out, so he quickly struck towards her wrist, neutralizing her move. At the same time, he jumped to the cave entrance, effectively trapping her inside. But the entrance was narrow and he could barely turn around, so with Huang Rong's fierce onslaught coupled with her indifference to defense, her power seemed to have increased tremendously. Although Ouyang Ke was better than her, he did not want to injure her, so he was at a disadvantage.

In a brief moment they had exchanged fifty or sixty moves and Huang Rong was in danger. Her martial arts had been taught to her by her father while Ouyang Ke's were taught by his uncle. Huang Yaoshi's and Ouyang Feng's martial arts were about the same level, but Huang Rong was only around fifteen while Ouyang Ke was almost thirty, so the difference in their martial arts was almost twenty years' worth of training. Moreover Huang Rong was not as hard working as Ouyang Ke and although she learned some skills from Hong Qigong, she'd hardly practiced them. At this time, even with Ouyang Ke's injuries, she was still unable to gain an advantage.

Suddenly Huang Rong launched herself forward and sent her spike towards him with a backstroke. Ouyang Ke blocked it and Huang Rong followed up closely with a fierce stab towards his right shoulder. His right arm was broken and in a splint so he could not exert any strength there. He

tried to use his left hand to intercept that move, but the spike made a semi-circle, changed directions midway, and stabbed into his right shoulder. Huang Rong was elated, only to feel her hand suddenly go numb and had to drop the spike because her wrist's acupoint had been hit.

Ouyang Ke was swift and agile; seeing that she was about to escape, he hit her 'Xuan Zhong' and 'Zhong Tou' acupoints consecutively with his legs. Huang Rong was in midair when she was struck and she fell towards the ground. Ouyang Ke moved forward and threw his outer gown on the ground, laughing, "Ah, don't hurt yourself." Huang Rong spun the spike around and tried to jump up but her legs were numb and she only managed to get a foot off the ground before falling again.

Ouyang Ke came to help her up. Huang Rong used her only non-immobilized arm and punched him. But in the confusion, her punch lacked strength and Ouyang Ke laughed as he sealed her last acupoint. This time Huang Rong was totally immobilized and she inwardly regretted, "Why did I did not stab myself just now? Now I can't even beg for death." She was on fire inside and everything went dark as she fainted. Ouyang Ke smoothly consoled her, saying, "Don't be afraid!" He stretched his arm out to hug her. Suddenly he heard a cold voice above his head, saying, "Do you wish to live or die?"

Ouyang Ke was shocked, twisted his head around and saw Hong Qigong standing at the entrance looking at him with a side ways glance from his eyes. He once heard his uncle mention the incident where Wang Chongyang jumped out of his coffin and nearly killed him, so he immediately thought, "The old beggar pretended to be dead and now I'm dead!" He'd tasted Hong Qigong's skills before and knew he did not even come close, so in shock he knelt down and said, "I

was just playing with Miss Huang. Uncle Hong, please don't be angry."

Hong Qigong spat and shouted, "Scoundrel, aren't you going to unseal her acupoints or do you need me to do it?" Ouyang Ke agreed repeatedly and hurriedly unblocked her acupoints. Hong Qigong said coldly, "Enter the cave again and I'll show no mercy. Scram!" Ouyang Ke darted out like a rabbit.

Huang Rong awoke as though from a dream. Hong Qigong could not hold on any longer and collapsed. Huang Rong was shocked and agitated and quickly held him up. She noticed his mouth filled with blood and three teeth fell out. Huang Rong was very sad as she thought, "Even with Master's wonderful abilities, such a fall actually broke his teeth."

Hong Qigong took his teeth and laughed, "Teeth ah teeth, you don't want to savor exquisite food with me anymore. I never expected you to leave before I did!" He was actually in very bad shape from the snake poison in his body and a palm strike by Ouyang Feng which almost shattered his spine. Because of his high skills, he was fortunately spared from death, but he was as weak as someone without martial arts.

When Huang Rong's acupoints were blocked, Hong Qigong actually did not have the strength to unblock them for her and had to use his reputation to frighten Ouyang Ke into doing it for him. He saw Huang Rong's grave expression and said, "Don't worry. With this old beggar around, he wouldn't dare to disturb you." Huang Rong asked, "When I'm inside the cave that creep won't show up, but what about food?" Though resourceful, she was flustered now and could not think straight.



Hong Qigong asked, "You're thinking of ways to obtain food right?" Huang Rong nodded. Hong Qigong said, "Help me down to the beach to view the sun." Huang Rong complied immediately and said, "OK! Let's go fishing." She let him lean on her shoulder and they walked slowly to the beach.

The weather was good on this day and the sea seemed endless, moving gently in the sea breeze. As the sun shone on her, their spirits were lifted. Ouyang Ke was also standing on the beach, but when he saw them coming, he immediately retreated several zhang, then stopped to watch them because they did not chase him.

They both worried, "This slimy creature is really hard to shake off; he may discover our weakness sooner or later." But right now they could not care too much. Hong Qigong sat on a rock while Huang Rong broke off a tree branch to use as a fishing rod. The fish population thrived around this island because no one molested them, so within a short time she caught three big fish.

Huang Rong used the same method she used to cook chicken to cook the fish and they ate their fill. After resting for a while, Hong Qigong asked Huang Rong to display the moves of the 'Dog Beating Skill' and gave some pointers along the way. Huang Rong then understood more of the finer profound changes of the skill. By the time evening came, she had practiced until she was very hot, so she removed her outer coat and jumped into the sea to bathe. Suddenly she had a thought, "I've heard that the Dragon Palace at the bottom of the sea has a very beautiful Dragon Princess; I wonder if Jing ge ge has gone to the Dragon Palace?"

As she dreamily kicked in the water she felt a sharp pain in her foot and quickly retracted it; but felt as though it was being grabbed by something and she could not get free.

She'd played in the sea since young and was not afraid of large clams; she was about to reach out her hand to catch it and got a shock instead. The clam was almost as big as a table; it was larger than any clam she had seen at Peach Blossom Island. She stretched out both hands to pry it open.

The clam was incredibly strong and even with both hands she could not force it open. The clam gripped her even tighter and her leg felt even more painful. Huang Rong smacked through the water, hoping to yank it out of the bottom but she had not expected it to feel like it weighed around two or three hundred jin. The clam had been living on the seabed for many years and had become part of the reef, how could it be easy to move it?

Huang Rong struggled a while more but felt her foot become even more painful; she was worried and gulped down two mouthfuls of water and thought, "Although I have no wish to live, I cannot leave Master alone here to be bullied by that scoundrel, I wouldn't die in peace." She quickly grabbed a large stone and smashed it on the clam, but because its shell was tough and she could not exert much strength through the water, even though she hit it repeatedly, it did not budge.

As the clam was attacked it tightened its grip further and Huang Rong swallowed water again; then she suddenly thought of something and quickly put the stone down, grabbed a handful of sand, and threw it into the open clam. The clam was indeed irritated by the sand and hurriedly opened up, wanting to expel the sand. As soon as her leg was free, she wasted no time swimming to the surface and sucked in some fresh air.

Hong Qigong noticed that she was submerged for such a long time and became worried since he knew she must have

met some trouble in the water. Wanting to help her, he anxiously splashed around in the water for a brief moment before he saw Huang Rong surface and hailed her in his excitement. Huang Rong waved to her master and decided to dive again. This time she was prepared and dived some distance away from the giant clam and shook it, then used the reef as a pivot to lift it up. She dragged the clam back to the shore. When the clam left the water, it lost its buoyancy and became as heavy as a large rock. Huang Rong could not move it further. Then she grabbed a large stone and struck the clam to vent her anger. When she saw the deep wound the clam had inflicted on her, she thought of her close brush with death and stopped hitting it.

On this night the two of them made the clam into a good meal and they thought that it tasted really good. The next day when Hong Qigong awoke, he felt that the great pain in his body was less intense. His stomach felt really comfortable and he contentedly sighed.

Hong Qigong said, "After sleeping for a night, my injury seemed to have improved by quite a bit." Huang Rong was elated and exclaimed, "It must be the clam meat which helped you." Hong Qigong laughed, "The clam meat didn't help much, but because the food was delicious, it satisfied my mouth. After that my recovery follows automatically by a small amount."

Huang Rong giggled and rushed out to the beach to find the remains of the clam meat. In her eagerness, she forgot about Ouyang Ke. Just as she cut off two slices of meat, she suddenly saw a figure that was moving closer to her. Huang Rong bent over and grabbed part of the clam's shell, threw it and jumped away at the same time, reaching the shoreline.

After observing Hong Qigong from a distance for a day, Ouyang Ke was becoming more suspicious since he could hardly walk, but he did not dare go into the cave. Now he forced himself forward and said, "Sister, don't go, I want to talk to you." Huang Rong said, "I'm ignoring you, yet you disregard that...you're really shameless." She then made a face at him.

Ouyang Ke watched her childish behavior which caused his face to lose color and his heart to itch; he advanced two steps and laughed, "It's your fault; it's because you're so beautiful that people can't ignore you." Huang Rong laughed, "I said I'm ignoring you and I mean it. It's useless to sweet-talk me." Ouyang Ke advanced yet another step and said, "I don't believe you."

Huang Rong's face became a shade darker and she said, "Move another step forward and I'll ask Master to club you." Ouyang Ke said, "Forget it...can he even walk? I'll go in and carry him out, OK?" Huang Rong felt a jolt inside and retreated two steps. Ouyang Ke grinned, "If you'd like to jump into the sea then go ahead. I'll wait here for you and we'll see who can last the longest."

Huang Rong said, "Fine, you're bullying me, so I'll ignore you forever." She turned and ran, but tripped on a stone and fell down. Ouyang Ke sort of expected this so he laughed, "You're really mischievous and naughty, but I love it." He held his gown in his hand to catch any hidden needles she might throw and walked towards her. Huang Rong shouted, "Don't come near!" She struggled to her feet but fell again after three steps.

This time her fall was more serious and half her body was in the sea; she seemed to have fainted. Ouyang Ke thought, "This girl is very crafty, I won't fall for her tricks. With your skills, why did you fall for no apparent reason?" He stood

there and observed her. After some time, he saw that she was still motionless and the tide was about to engulf her whole body.

Ouyang Ke became worried and thought, "This time she really has fainted; if I don't save her she might drown." He ran forward and tried to pull her legs. When he tugged her legs, he got a shock because her body was stiff, so he quickly lifted her up. Huang Rong suddenly hugged his legs and called out, "Go down!" Ouyang Ke could not stand and the two went into the water together.

In the water, despite his high skills, he could not use them and thought, "Even with precautions, I fell for her trick; this time my life is lost!" Huang Rong originally wanted to dunk his head in the water to appease her anger. However as Ouyang Ke felt the water fill his mouth, he could not feel where his body was and struggled wildly, wanting to grab onto Huang Rong.

However she had expected that and swam around him; how could he catch her? In the struggle, Ouyang Ke swallowed a few mouthfuls of water and his body sank deeper until his feet touched the seabed. Even though his martial arts were good and he was quick-thinking, he was at a great disadvantage in the water and could feel his body floating aimlessly. He hurriedly grabbed a rock on the seabed and used his internal energy to hold his breath while he looked around trying to find the direction to the shore. But the water was murky and he could not tell east from west, so he walked around for a few steps and decided that walking upwards was a good idea. He hit rock and took large steps towards the shallower area. With the reef on the seabed, movements were very difficult, so he used his internal energy to dash across in one go. When Huang Rong saw that he did not surface for some time, she quickly looked around and was surprised to see him walking in the water.

She swam behind him and used her spike to thrust towards him.

Ouyang Ke felt the water flowing faster, so he quickly evaded and moved even faster. Now he really felt the lack of air in his lungs and let go of the large stone he was carrying trying to surface to breathe. When he stuck his head out, he saw that he was already close to shore. Huang Rong knew she could not stop him now so she sighed and dived again. Ouyang Ke did not die but crawled onto the beach completely drenched and his senses were dull. He threw up all the water he swallowed and felt his body go weak as if he suffered from some great illness. He was very angry and thought, "I'll go kill that old beggar and see if that girl listens to me then!"

Although he had these thoughts, he was still wary of Hong Qigong and breathed deeply for a few moments to get rid of his fatigue. Then he broke off a tree branch as a makeshift weapon and ran towards the cave.

He avoided going in directly and tried to slip in from the side. He listened for a moment and did not pick up any movements in the room. He looked in and saw Hong Qigong sitting on the ground, meditating. His face showed no signs of any injury.

Ouyang Ke thought, "I'll test him to see if he can move." He said in a loud voice, "Uncle Hong, this is bad...this is bad!" Hong Qigong opened his eyes and asked, "What?" Ouyang Ke pretended to be in a state of panic and said, "Sister Huang tried to catch a rabbit but fell into a deep valley and is injured. She can't climb out!"

Hong Qigong was shocked and said, "Then quickly save her!" Ouyang Ke was excited and thought, "If he can walk, why doesn't he come out and save her?" He walked in and

laughed, "She tried several ways and means to take my life, why should I help her? You go save her."

Hong Qigong observed his expression, knew that he was lying, and thought, "This scum has discovered that I've lost my martial arts...I'm in danger!" In this situation, he could only try to bring him down as well; he secretly channeled all his strength to his arm, and waited for him to come closer before he struck. However when he did that, he felt a sharp pain near his heart and his body felt like it was about to come apart. When he saw Ouyang Ke's twisted smile, he let out a long sigh and waited for death.

Huang Rong saw Ouyang Ke get to shore and got worried, thinking, "At this point the scoundrel will be prepared for me; it will be harder to scheme against him now." She swam out a ways and headed left. After a while she saw lush foliage and noticed that this beach was different. She thought of Peach Blossom Island and became sad. Then she thought, "If I can find a safe place here for us to hide for a while, that scoundrel might not find us." It was not a fantastic plan, but it was better than their situation now and he might not actually find them, giving her master time to recover. So she went ashore but she did not dare explore too far inland since she was afraid of bumping into Ouyang Ke. She stuck close to the seashore, thinking, "If I hadn't been so carefree in the past and had mastered Father's Five-Element skills, I'd have been able to handle that scoundrel. Aiyo, Father gave him the map to Peach Blossom Island and he'll surely be able to understand it."

She was so absorbed in thought that she tripped on a tree vine and stumbled; above her she heard some rustling noises followed by mud and small pebbles raining down on her. She dashed aside but bumped into a tree behind her and a few of the pebbles hit her body. Fortunately she was wearing the Soft Hedgehog Armour, so she was not really

hurt. She looked up and was so stunned that her heart beat rapidly. She saw a sheer cliff face with a gigantic rock at its edge. Half the rock was hanging over the edge and even slight disturbance could bring the rock crashing down. The top of the cliff had many thick vines winding around and the very vine she tripped on just now was attached to the rock. If she snapped a vine connected directly to the thousand-pound rock [the catty in the chapter title is 500 grams or 1.1 lb], the rock could have smacked into her, turning her into mincemeat.

The rock had moved but was not dislodged. Huang Rong became extremely careful and watched where she was going while jumping here and stopping there. She moved back several dozen meters and became curious. She knew that she could pull the rock down with just one arm but no one ever came here; there was not even a bird in sight and the rock had been here for hundreds of years.

Cliffs surrounded this place so even the sea breeze could not get through, and it seemed likely this rock had rocked in the wind for the hundreds of years. As Huang Rong headed back to find her master she suddenly had an idea, "Heaven wants that scoundrel dead and has presented this wonderful opportunity; how can I be so dense?" She became excited and somersaulted twice.

She hurriedly returned to the cliff and carefully examined the place. She saw trees reaching up to the sky and if one wanted to avoid the falling rock, one could only move four or five feet in any direction at most. If that rock came crashing down, even birds or squirrels might not evade it. She took her spike out and cautiously walked to the base of the cliff and noted the seven or eight vines directly attached to the rock so that she would not touch them, then she cut the remaining vines. When she cut a vine she held her



breath because she was afraid that one small mistake and it would be she who would be flattened.

When she finished, she was drenched with sweat and felt that it had been more tiring than a fierce battle. She then tied the cut vines together and placed a few heaps of dry grass as markers, then memorized the route she took before heading back. As she went she hummed a few tunes along the way, feeling quite proud of herself.

When she got near the cave she still had not seen Ouyang Ke. Then she suddenly heard a perverted laugh coming from inside followed by someone saying, "You claim to be among the best martial artists, yet today you are in Grandfather's power, how do you feel? All right...because you're an elder, I'll let you have a three-move advantage, how's that? You can display each and every one of the 'Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms'!" Huang Rong softly exclaimed, "Ah!" She knew that the situation was dire and shouted, "Father, you're here? Ah, Uncle Ouyang, you're here too!"

Ouyang Ke had already assessed Hong Qigong's abilities and was about to strike when he heard Huang Rong's shout. He was happy and thought, "How is it possible that Uncle and Old Heretic Huang are here?" Then he thought further, "It must be that girl shouting rubbish to save the old beggar. Fine, since the old beggar is in my control anyway I might as well take a look." He then exited the cave.

He saw Huang Rong waving towards the beach and shouting, "Father...Father!" Ouyang Ke looked that way but of course he did not see Huang Yaoshi. He laughed, "Sister, you wanted to trick me into coming out to play...how could I refuse?" Huang Rong laughed and said, "Who's lying?" She then ran to the beach. Ouyang Ke laughed, "This time I'm

prepared; you want to drag me into the sea again, so let's try it." Then he chased her. His Qinggong [lightness kung fu] was good and he was catching up fast. Huang Rong inwardly exclaimed, "This is bad! I might even get caught before I reach that cliff." She ran another few dozen meters and Ouyang Ke was almost catching her. Huang Rong broke left and off the beach. Ouyang Ke had learned his lesson and did not dare go near, so he laughed, "OK, let's play hide-and-seek."

Though he did not stop, he was prepared for any trick she might try. Huang Rong stopped and laughed, "There's a large worm in front of you, and if you chase me again it'll eat you in one gulp." Ouyang Ke laughed, "I'm a worm too and I'm going to eat you!" He leaped forward but Huang Rong just laughed and ran ahead.

The two came close to the cliff wall soon enough. Huang Rong ran even faster and shouted, "Come on!" Just as she was about to reach the wall, she saw two figures on the beach. She was really curious but did not have the luxury of stopping; she carefully looked for the piles of grass then ran all the way to the cliff's base.

Ouyang Ke laughed, "Where's the worm?" He also ran faster and reached the cliff wall quick as an arrow. The spot where Huang Rong stopped was already cleared of vines, but Ouyang Ke, not suspecting a trap, stepped right into it, wrenching the rock out of its place. The vines snapped and Ouyang Ke felt a great pressure descending on him. He looked up and what he saw scared the living daylights out of him; a mountain of a rock rolling down towards him.

Although the rock was very high up, the gust of wind it created was so strong that he could hardly breathe; he hastily jumped backwards, but smacked right into a tree with such a great force that the tree cracked and the

splinters pierced him. At this point he was fleeing for his life and ignored the pain. He jumped again, but only managed to move three feet. Now he was in a daze, then suddenly felt as though someone had jolted him awake, dragging him several feet away....but it was too late. Amidst the thunderous rumble and flying dust, he fainted.

Huang Rong saw that her plan had worked and she was very happy. She had not expected the deafening rumble which seemed to shove her aside and her head was hit by the countless grains of dirt and dust. She bent over and held her head for a moment before opening her eyes and saw two shadows through the dust.

As the dust settled, she rubbed her eyes and saw that it was actually West Poison Ouyang Feng and the other was the one she so deeply missed...Guo Jing. Huang Rong shouted and jumped for joy. Guo Jing had never expected to meet her here and he rushed forward and hugged her. In their excitement, they had forgotten that their enemy was close by.

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When Guo Jing and Ouyang Feng were fighting on the boat, neither could gain the advantage, while at the same time the boat was sinking. It took them down with it. Deep in the sea the water pressure was very high and they felt water forcing its way into their ears and noses, causing great pain. They had to stop their struggle and cover their ears and noses.

The bottom of the sea had a swift undercurrent moving in a different direction than the surface current and before they knew it they were swept some distance away. When Guo Jing managed to get up to the surface to breathe it was already dark and the boat seemed very far away. While Guo

Jing shouted, at that very moment Huang Rong was looking for him; but they were so far apart, how could they find each other?

Guo Jing shouted again and felt a tug on his leg, followed by another head reaching the surface...it was Ouyang Feng. He was at a disadvantage in the water, so although he was a martial arts master, he struggled wildly and refused to release Guo Jing's leg.

Guo Jing struggled harder but his other leg was also grabbed. They wrestled for a brief moment before submerging again. When they hit the surface, Guo Jing shouted, "Let my legs go...I won't desert you." Ouyang Feng also realized that this would kill them both, so he released his legs and grabbed his shoulder.

Guo Jing supported him, allowing them to float. At this time they saw a large wooden board floating by and it bumped Guo Jing. Ouyang Feng shouted, "Careful!" Guo Jing grabbed it, shouting, "Grab it and don't let go!"

They looked around but could not see any boats. Ouyang Feng's Snake Staff was lost and he worried, "If we meet any sharks, we can only hit them wildly like Zhou Botong did. I saved him that time, but who'll save me now?" They floated for some time and saw many fish swimming by so they had to depend on the fish for survival.

As the ancient saying goes, "Helping each other in the same boat ( 同舟共济 )", so these two men who fought a bitter battle just a while ago could share the same raft. During this time they were fortunate not to meet any danger. In time the current brought them to the island where Hong Qigong and Huang Rong were only two days after their arrival.

When they hit shore they lay down for some time before they suddenly heard someone laughing. Ouyang Feng

jumped up and followed the laughter and coincidentally met Ouyang Ke who had just fallen into the trap. Ouyang Feng tried to rush forward to save him. He managed to pull him back several feet but Ouyang Ke's legs were crushed by the rock and he fainted from the pain.

Ouyang Feng was suspicious and looked around but did not find any more danger. He went back to check on his nephew. He noticed that he was still breathing so he tried to push the rock off him, but it did not budge even an inch. He then knelt down and grunting, tried again with both hands. Even though his strength was tremendous, how could even he move a thousand-pound rock?

He bent down just as Ouyang Ke opened his eyes and called, "Uncle!" Ouyang Feng said, "You'll have to bear with it for a while." He hugged him and pulled him, but Ouyang Ke screamed and fainted again. The rock had pinned his legs beneath it, so this pulling only worsened his pain but did not free him. Ouyang Feng was perturbed.

Guo Jing held Huang Rong's hand and asked, "Where's master?" Huang Rong pointed, saying, "Over there." Guo Jing hearing that his master was alright was elated and wanted her to lead him there. Then he heard Ouyang Ke's scream and could not bear it; he said to Ouyang Feng, "I'll help you." Huang Rong tugged his sleeve, saying, "Let's go see master, ignore this bad guy!"

Ouyang Feng did not know that this was a trap set up by her since he saw the rock tumble down and it was impossible for anyone to lift it up the cliff. But when he heard Huang Rong stop Guo Jing, his anger flared. Then he heard that Hong Qigong was here and he was startled, thinking, "That beggar took one of my palms and was also poisoned by my snake, yet he's not dead; even at that he should be ninety percent dead, so why should I fear him?"

He saw Guo Jing and Huang Rong about to leave so he knelt down again and pretended to push the rock as he waited for them to turn away before saying, "Don't worry, I'll save you. For now just concentrate on circulating your Qi to protect your heart and pretend that those legs are not yours." He followed them and saw them with an arm around each other and talking romantically; he was flabbergasted and thought, "If I don't torture you until you're worse than dead, I'm not the Western Poison."

Huang Rong took Guo Jing to the cave entrance. Guo Jing rushed in and shouted, "Master!" Then he saw that Hong Qigong's eyes were closed and there was no color in his face. He had been insulted by Ouyang Ke and his injury had relapsed. Huang Rong quickly undid his outer gown while Guo Jing massaged his limbs.

Hong Qigong opened his eyes and saw Guo Jing; he was naturally very happy to see him and smiled, saying in a low voice, "Jing'er, you're here too!" Guo Jing was about to reply when a rough voice cut in from behind, which said, "Old beggar, so am I." Guo Jing turned around to block the entrance. Huang Rong snatched her master's bamboo stick and stood beside Guo Jing.

Ouyang Feng laughed, "Old beggar, come out...if you don't, I'm coming in." Guo Jing and Huang Rong looked at each other while thinking, "Even if it costs us our lives, we must not let him molest Master." Ouyang Feng laughed and stepped in. Guo Jing stepped forward to block him.

Ouyang Feng twisted aside to evade his palm strike and moved to his right. Then a bamboo stick flew over and made a circle that seemed aimed at three separate spots at the same time, making it difficult to deal with. He waved his left hand and swept his leg to force his opponents back. He did

not expect Huang Rong's stick to hit the centre of the circle his leg made.

Ouyang Feng was surprised and jumped back, watching carefully. Huang Rong was using the 'Dog Beating Skill' and had managed to force her much stronger opponent backwards. She was feeling very proud of herself. Ouyang Feng had not expected that this girl would learn the old beggar's wonderful rod skill. He snorted and advanced again to hit her bamboo stick. Huang Rong executed the stick skill she'd just learned as she poked, hit, circled and flew around; although she could not injure him, she managed to evade seven or eight successive moves.

Guo Jing, who was surprised and happy, kept cheering, "Very good Rong'er, great rod skill!" Then he attacked with a fist and palm from the side. Ouyang Feng shouted in anger, then knelt down while launching both palms. Even before the palms arrived the wind from the palms caused dust to fly. Guo Jing saw that the palms were very powerful and was afraid that Huang Rong might get injured if she was hit; he hurriedly pushed her aside and they managed to evade the strike together.

Ouyang Feng stepped forward two steps and struck out again with both palms. His attack was terribly strong and he had fought to a draw with Hong Qigong on Peach Blossom Island a few days ago. Guo Jing and Huang Rong were far from his match and were forced to retreat step by step. Ouyang Feng rushed into the cave and flipped his palm, hitting the stone wall and causing bits of stone to flake off. He brought the other palm up above Hong Qigong's head and held it there to sense his condition.

Huang Rong said, "My master saved your life, yet you want to hurt him... aren't you ashamed?" Ouyang Feng pushed Hong Qigong's chest lightly and felt his chest muscles

contract, indicating that his martial abilities were really gone. He was happy inside and lifted him, saying, "If you help me rescue my nephew, I'll spare the beggar's life."

Huang Rong said, "Heaven released the rock that pins him, you saw that yourself, so who can save him? Try any more tricks and Heaven will crush you with a rock too." Guo Jing noticed that Ouyang Feng had lifted Hong Qigong higher and was prepared to throw him down...but he doubted that he would really do it. Still he was worried and quickly said, "Put him down and we'll go save your nephew."

Ouyang Feng missed his nephew and was very eager to hurry to him, but he kept his face impassive and put Hong Qigong down very slowly.

Huang Rong said, "Helping him is not difficult, but let's make an agreement." Ouyang Feng said, "What do you want?" Huang Rong said, "After we save your nephew, you must not harm the three of us while we're here on this island." Ouyang Feng thought, "My nephew and I are afraid of water; if we want to get back I may need to depend on these three people." He nodded his head, saying, "OK, I'll not kill any of you now, but I can't promise anything after we leave this island."

Huang Rong said, "When the time comes, even if you leave us alone, we'll come after you. Another thing, my father has betrothed me to him and you saw that for yourself. If your nephew bothers me again, you're worse than a pig or a dog." Ouyang Feng spat, saying, "OK, but that only applies on this island, once we leave, then we'll see."

Huang Rong smiled, saying, "Finally, although we'll try our best to help you, we're not gods; if fate has decreed that your nephew must die, you can't blame us." Ouyang Feng said, "If my nephew dies, you two can forget about living."



Little girl, shut up and come save my nephew." He then ran to where the rock was.

Guo Jing was about to follow when Huang Rong said, "Jing ge ge, when he uses his strength to push the rock, you can strike his back when he least expects it." Guo Jing answered, "We must honour our word; let's save his nephew first, then try to avenge Master." Huang Rong sighed and knew that it was useless to try to get him to backstab someone.

For the past two days she had thought that he'd died in the sea; now that she was with him again her heart exploded with happiness. Even if Guo Jing made any unreasonable demands, she would listen to him; moreover his actions were those of an honorable gentleman, so she smiled sweetly and said, "OK, you're a saint and I'll listen to you."

They ran to the base of the cliff and heard Ouyang Ke groaning in the distance. Ouyang Feng shouted, "Hurry up!" They went over and stood beside him and three pairs of hands pushed the rock together. Ouyang Feng said, "Up!" and they pushed at the same time. The rock moved an inch before slamming down again. Ouyang Ke screamed and his eyes rolled up.

Ouyang Feng was shocked and immediately supported him and felt his breathing was weak. To bear the pain he'd bitten through his tongue, filling his mouth with blood. Even with Ouyang Feng's outstanding martial arts, he was powerless to move the rock. Now he had made it worse for his nephew and also lost a shoe in the sand. Ouyang Feng bent down to pick up his shoe and got another shock...the tide was slowly rising and was already reaching the rock. Ouyang Feng menacingly said, "Little girl, if you want your master to live, you'd better save my nephew quickly."

Huang Rong was already thinking about it. The rock was enormous and there was no one else who could help them... how could they move it? She had come up with more than ten ideas in a flash, but none seemed workable; when she heard Ouyang Feng, she said, "If Master wasn't injured, we could easily move this rock with his tremendous strength. Now..." She threw up her hands to indicate that it was useless.

Though his sentence was said in anger, Ouyang Feng thought, "Maybe it really is fate; if the old beggar wasn't injured and with his chivalrous nature, he'd definitely help. Who knew that when I injured him, it was as good as killing my own nephew?" Although Ouyang Ke was officially his nephew, he'd had an affair with his sister-in-law and he was in fact his son.

Ouyang Feng was usually cold-hearted, but now he felt regret. He turned his head and saw the water had risen a few more feet. Ouyang Ke yelled, "Uncle, kill me with one blow! I... I can't take it anymore!" Ouyang Feng took out a sharp knife and gritted his teeth, saying, "You bear with it for a while; even without your legs you can still live." He moved forward with the intention of severing his nephew's legs.

Ouyang Ke exclaimed, "No, no, Uncle, just stab me to death!" Ouyang Feng said angrily, "With so many years of my guidance, how can you be so useless?" Ouyang Ke hugged his chest and tried to bear the pain, not daring to say another word. Ouyang Feng saw that the rock had pinned him nearly to the hips; even if he amputated his legs, he might not live...so he hesitated.

Huang Rong saw that the uncle and nephew had nothing left to say and both looked dejected; her heart softened and she remembered how her father moved rocks on Reach

Blossom Island. She exclaimed, "Wait! I've got a way, but I'm not sure if it will work." Ouyang Feng was elated and said, "Good lady, just say it!"

Huang Rong was thinking, "Now that you want to save your nephew, you're not calling me names anymore...but 'Good Lady', huh!" She smiled and said, "OK, you must listen to me now. Let's cut some tree bark and make a rope strong enough to lift this rock." Ouyang Feng said, "Who's going to pull the rope?" Huang Rong said, "We'll pull like raising a sail..." Ouyang Feng immediately understood and said, "Yes, yes, just like that!"

Guo Jing heard Huang Rong mention using tree bark and did not question her; instead he pulled out his dagger and began cutting some tree bark. Ouyang Feng and Huang Rong followed his lead and within a short time, they had cut many strips of tree bark. As Ouyang Feng was cutting the bark he looked at his nephew and suddenly exclaimed, "Don't cut anymore!" Huang Rong curiously asked, "What... why not?"

Ouyang Feng pointed at his nephew and Guo Jing and Huang Rong looked at him. They saw that the tide was rising faster and had already submerged half his body. He would be drowned before they had gathered enough material. Ouyang Ke was motionless in the water. Huang Rong said, "Don't fret. Just cut!"

Although Ouyang Feng was a monster, he meekly obeyed her. Huang Rong jumped down from the tree and ran to Ouyang Ke and used several big stones to support his upper body. That way his nose was still above water.

In a low voice Ouyang Ke said, "Miss Huang, thank you. Even if I don't live, I'll die contented knowing that you tried to save me." Huang Rong felt apologetic and said, "Don't

thank me. Do you know that I was the one who laid this trap?" Ouyang Ke said, "Don't speak so loudly; if my uncle hears it, he won't let you off. I guessed it long ago; to die at your hands would leave me with no regrets."

Huang Rong sighed and thought, "Although this person is annoying, he treats me nicely." She returned to the tree and began braiding the bark. She joined three together to form a thin rope and then six ropes together to form a thick rope, and then she joined several thick ropes together to form a massive rope. Ouyang Feng continuously cut tree bark while Huang Rong unceasingly wove the ropes.

Although they were fast, the tide was faster and even before the massive rope was half-complete, the water had risen up to Ouyang Ke's mouth. Soon only his nose was left sticking out. Ouyang Feng jumped down and said, "You can go. I want to speak with my nephew. You have tried your best and I appreciate it." His voice was heavy with emotion and he was seemingly resigned to the situation.

Guo Jing saw that it was hopeless and went off together with Huang Rong. They'd walked several zhang when Huang Rong whispered, "Let's go behind the rock and listen to what he says." Guo Jing said, "That doesn't concern us. Besides, he'll discover us." Huang Rong said, "Once his nephew dies, he'll try to harm Master, so we must keep ourselves informed to be prepared. If we're found out we'll just say that we've come back to send his nephew off."

Guo Jing nodded. They went around a bend, behind some trees, and then stealthily crept back behind the rock. They heard Ouyang Feng say, "Go in peace. I know what you're thinking...you wanted Old Heretic Huang to marry his daughter to you, but I fear I can't grant your wish."

Guo Jing and Huang Rong were startled and thought, "He's about to die; why would Ouyang Feng say that?" As they heard more, they became angrier. Ouyang Feng was actually saying, "I'll go kill that girl and bury her with you. Everyone dies; if you can't live with her then you can die with her and have no regrets."

Ouyang Ke's mouth was beneath the water and he could not speak. Huang Rong took Guo Jing's hand and they stealthily left. Around the corner, Guo Jing angrily said, "Let's confront that old poisonous thing." Huang Rong said, "With him we must compare wits, not strength." Guo Jing asked, "How?" Huang Rong said, "I'm thinking."

As they walked near a ravine, she saw some reeds. Huang Rong thought of something and said, "If he weren't so evil, I could save his nephew." Guo Jing quickly asked, "How?" Huang Rong took out her knife and cut a hollow reed and put it to her mouth and breathed through it for a while. Guo Jing laughed, "Ah...that is really a good idea. How did you think of it? Should we save him?"

Huang Rong pouted, "Of course not. That old poisonous thing wants to kill me...let him do it, hmm, I'm not afraid." But when she thought of Ouyang Feng's cruel methods, she could not help but gasp. His martial arts were much stronger than his nephew's and he was much more cunning. If they fell into his trap, it would not be good. Guo Jing remained silent.

Huang Rong took his hand, saying gently, "Don't tell me you want me to save that scoundrel? You're worried about me, right? Those two may not treat us well." Guo Jing said, "You're right, but I am worried about you and Master. Since that old poisonous thing is the head of a sect, what he says has some credibility." Huang Rong said, "OK, let's save him and then talk; we'll plan as we go along."

They turned back and saw Ouyang Feng standing in the water, supporting his nephew. When he saw the duo coming, his eyes glinted and it was obvious he wanted to kill them. He said roughly, "I told you to leave; why did you return?" Huang Rong sat down on a stone and laughed, "I came to see if he's dead yet." Ouyang Feng snapped, "So what if he's dead, so what if he's alive?"

Huang Rong said, "If he's dead then it's no use now!" Ouyang Feng jumped out of the water, hastily saying, "Good... good lady, he's not dead yet, you must have found a way. Say it...say it quickly." Huang Rong threw the hollow reed over and said, "Put it in his mouth and he won't die." Ouyang Feng was happy and jumped into the water and stuffed the reed into his nephew's mouth.

The water had already covered his nose and he was exhaling his last bit of air, but his ears could still hear their conversation. When the reed reached his mouth, he breathed hard, felt comfortable and momentarily forgot about the pain in his legs. Ouyang Feng said, "Quick...hurry, let's connect the ropes."

Huang Rong laughed, "Uncle Ouyang, you want me dead to accompany your nephew, isn't that right?" Ouyang Feng jerked and thought, "How did she hear what I said?" Huang Rong laughed, "If you kill me and you meet some trouble later, who's going to help you?" Now that Ouyang Feng was depending on her, he could only pretend not to hear her and went back to work on the tree bark.

They worked for more than two hours and made an enormously thick rope nearly thirty zhang long [99 meters or 325 ft]. By now the water level was nearly half-way up the rock. Ouyang Ke's head was a few feet under water and only the tip of the hollow reed was exposed. Ouyang Feng

was still worried and occasionally reached his hand under the water to check on him.

After another hour the water began to recede and Ouyang Ke's head was slowly emerging. Huang Rong measured the rope's length and shouted, "Enough! Now I need four massive poles for the 'masts'." Ouyang Feng was doubtful; he knew that on this deserted island, even a knife was hard to find, much less an axe sturdy enough for their task. He asked, "How do we get that?" Huang Rong said, "Don't worry, just find the wood first."

Ouyang Feng was afraid she would throw a tantrum and refuse to help him, so he did not ask again and ran around looking for trees with thick enough trunks. He crouched down, gathered his strength and launched his palms at each of the trees. The trees fell after a few strikes. Guo Jing and Huang Rong witnessed this powerful display of internal strength and shuddered. Ouyang Feng found a long and flat rock and used that to cut away the tree branches.

Now Guo Jing and Huang Rong tied the rope round three of the thick tree trunks and looped the rope around the large rock before tying the end to the final tree trunk. That trunk was a centuries-old oak tree and even the arms of three or four people were not enough to circle the tree. Huang Rong said, "I guess this tree can handle the rock, right?" Ouyang Feng nodded.

Huang Rong told them to connect one more thick rope and they arranged the four tree trunks around the tree, forming a crisscross shape and looped the rope round the top. Ouyang Feng praised her, "Good lady, you're really smart, just like your father." Huang Rong laughed, "But how can I be compared to your nephew? Let's start!"

They acted together and used the oak tree as the pivot to pull the crisscross shaped formation. The rope became taut and the rock lifted slowly. The sun was about to set and the sky was red, illuminating the surface of the water.

The tide had already gone out and Ouyang Ke's body lay in the mud and his eyes were fixed on the rock. It moved slowly and steadily with a creaking sound, causing him to be anxiously happy. Though the rope had made one complete turn around its loop, the rock had only moved an inch and it was already causing great strain on the pivot point.

Although Ouyang Feng did not believe in divine intervention, he silently prayed throughout the process. Suddenly the rope snapped and the rock slammed down onto Ouyang Ke again; he tried to scream but no sound came out. The rope flew back and hit Huang Rong, knocking her off her feet. Guo Jing quickly helped her up.

At this stage Ouyang Feng lost all hope and Huang Rong could hardly smile. Guo Jing said, "We can join them back together, add another rope and try again." Ouyang Feng shook his head, "That'll be harder; the three of us aren't enough." Guo Jing mumbled to himself, "If only someone else would help us." Ouyang Feng got angry and snapped, "Obviously!" He knew Guo Jing had good intentions, but in his depression he vented his frustrations on him.

Huang Rong thought for a while then jumped up, laughing and clapping, "Yes, yes, there's someone who can help us." Guo Jing asked, "Who might that be?" Huang Rong said, "Hmmm, Brother Ouyang will have to bear more discomfort and wait for the tide to come in again before he can be set free." Ouyang Feng and Guo Jing both looked at her thinking, "Are you thinking that when the tide comes in, someone will come to our aid?"



Huang Rong laughed, "We're all tired and hungry; let's find some food." Ouyang Feng said, "Miss, you said someone will help us, please explain." Huang Rong said, "At this time tomorrow, Brother Ouyang will be free. For now I can't reveal the secret." Ouyang Feng saw that she had great confidence in herself and his doubts lessened. But he was still skeptical so he stayed with his nephew.

Guo Jing and Huang Rong caught a few wild hares and cooked one for the uncle and his nephew; then they shared the rest with Hong Qigong. When Guo Jing learned that the trap had been set by her, he was surprised and happy. They knew that Ouyang Feng was with his nephew and would not bother them, so they lit a fire at the cave entrance to prevent any wild animals from coming in and they slept very well. The next morning, Guo Jing saw a shadow at the entrance and he quickly jumped up. He saw Ouyang Feng standing there saying, "Is Miss Huang awake?"

Huang Rong was already awake but she pretended to be soundly asleep. Guo Jing whispered, "Not yet. What is it?" Ouyang Feng said, "When she wakes up, ask her to save him." Guo Jing said, "OK." Hong Qigong said, "I had her drink the 'Hundred-Day-Drunken-Stupor' Wine as well as hit her Sleeping Acupoint. It'll hard to wake her for three months."

Ouyang Feng was startled and Hong Qigong laughed heartily. Ouyang Feng realized that he was joking and became angry. Huang Rong sat up and laughed, "If we don't tease the Old Poison now, when will we get another chance?" She then combed her hair, washed her face extremely slowly and then went out to fish and catch rabbits for breakfast. Meanwhile Ouyang Feng paced up and down like he had ants in his pants. Guo Jing said, "Rong'er, when the water rises, will there really be someone to save him?"

Huang Rong said, "What do you think?" Guo Jing shook his head and said, "I really don't think so." Huang Rong laughed, "Me neither." Guo Jing was startled, "So you lied to him?" Huang Rong said, "Not really; when the tide rises, I have a way to save him." Guo Jing knew that she was very intelligent and resourceful so he did not question her further. Then they went to play around in the flowers.

Huang Rong had no companions when she was young and always played on the beach on Peach Blossom Island by herself. Now that she had Guo Jing with her, she was extremely happy. They played and laughed endlessly on the beach. Huang Rong said, "Jing ge ge, your hair is terribly messy, let me comb it."

They sat together on a rock. Huang Rong took out a small golden-jade comb and combed his hair carefully, then sighed, "Why don't we think of a way to get rid of those two poisonous creatures and then we can live here together with Master and never leave this place...what do you think?" Guo Jing said, "I was thinking of my six masters." Huang Rong said, "Hmmm, and my Father too."

After a while she said, "I wonder how Sister Mu is doing? Master asked me to be the Leader of the Beggar Clan and I'm starting to miss those beggars too." Guo Jing laughed, "Looks like we'll have to think of a way to get back." Huang Rong finished with his hair and tied it up. Guo Jing said, "The way you comb my hair reminds me of my mother."

Huang Rong laughed, "You can call me Mother then." Guo Jing smiled without replying. Huang Rong tickled him and asked, "Aren't you going to say it?" Guo Jing laughed and jumped up, messing his hair again. Huang Rong laughed too, "It's ok if you won't say it. Do you think anyone will call me 'Mother' in the future? Sit down."

Guo Jing sat down and Huang Rong wiped the sweat away, then kissed his forehead lightly. She thought of the previous day's fight with Ouyang Feng and remembered that Guo Jing had praised her 'Dog Beating Skills', so she wanted to teach it to him. Huang Rong knew that his martial arts had improved a lot and was more excited about that than her own skills.

Since she was Huang Yaoshi's daughter, she had access to wonderful martial arts skills since she was young, but she really did not pay attention to wonderful skills, just like a rich man's son would not bother about gold or silver. Then she thought, "This skill is meant exclusively for the Beggar Clan Leader, so I can't teach him" She asked, "Jing ge ge, do you want to be the Beggar Clan's Leader?"

Guo Jing said, "Master wants you to be the Clan Leader, why do you ask me?" Huang Rong said, "I'm a young girl and I don't look like a Beggar Clan Leader. Why don't I give up this appointment to you? With your commanding appearance the beggars will listen to you. Besides, if you become the Leader, this marvelous skill will be yours." Guo Jing said, "No, no. I can't be the Leader. I'm not intelligent enough to handle even small matters, much less important matters."

Huang Rong knew he was right. Even though Hong Qigong had no choice but to have her succeed him during this crisis, he must have known that despite her youth, she was very intelligent and probably no less capable than the four Elders. Also, he did not give her permission to give this responsibility to someone else and not even a silly boy who knew the 'Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms' and the 'Dog Beating Skill' could become the Leader. So she laughed, "OK. But I'm afraid that you can't learn this skill, then."

Guo Jing said, "There's no difference between you and me knowing it." Huang Rong knew that this sentence came from his heart and she was touched. She said, "When Master recovers I'll return the position to him. Then... then..." She wanted to say "Then we can get married" but somehow the words would not come out of her mouth. She asked, "Jing ge ge, do you know where babies come from?"

Guo Jing said, "I know." Huang Rong said, "Where?" Guo Jing said, "When people get married, they have babies." Huang Rong said, "Yes I know that too. But why do married people have babies?" Guo Jing said, "That I don't know." Huang Rong said, "Me neither. I asked Father, but he said they crawl out of nests."

Guo Jing was about to ask more when they suddenly heard a sharp voice saying, "Making babies? You'll know that when you grow up. The tide is already rising!" Huang Rong gasped and jumped up; she had not expected Ouyang Feng to be listening to them. Although she did not understand male-female relationships, she knew that talking about such stuff was embarrassing, so her face turned red and they quickly ran to the cliff.

Ouyang Ke had been under the rock for twenty-four hours and had been through much suffering. Ouyang Feng kept a straight face and said, "Miss Huang, you said that someone would come to help when the tide rises, this is not a joke." Huang Rong said, "My father knows the changes of the Five Elements, so of course his daughter would know a bit, although I can't be compared with him. Still, I can predict a bit of the future."

Ouyang Feng knew about her father's abilities, so he said, "Your father is coming? Splendid." Huang Rong paused, and then said, "Such a small matter wouldn't need my father's presence. Moreover, if my father knew that you

hurt my master, he wouldn't let you off. With us two included, how can you win? So what are you happy about?" Ouyang Feng could not argue this point and remained sullenly silent.

Huang Rong said to Guo Jing, "Jing ge ge, go get some tree branches...the more the better." Guo Jing agreed and went. Huang Rong mended the rope which had snapped the previous day with more bark. Ouyang Feng kept asking who was coming but she just hummed songs without replying.

Ouyang Feng was dissatisfied. But when he saw Huang Rong's relaxed expression, it kept his hopes up, so he went to help Guo Jing. He watched Guo Jing execute the 'Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms' and he only needed a few hits to bring down a sturdy tree. He thought, "His martial arts are good. Coupled with the 'Nine Yin Manual', he spells future disaster for me."

He decided that he had to extract his nephew dead or alive. He crouched down between two trees, sent out his palms simultaneously and each palm hit a tree, causing it to break. Guo Jing was awed and said, "Uncle Ouyang, I wonder when I can match your standard." Ouyang Feng did not reply but thought, "In your next life."

They carried all the wood back to the base of the cliff. Ouyang Feng looked out into the sea but could not even see the smallest speck of a boat. Huang Rong asked, "What are you looking for? No one's coming." Ouyang Feng was surprised and angry. He raised his voice, "No one?" Huang Rong said, "This is a deserted island and no one will come here." Ouyang Feng was flabbergasted, unable to speak and waiting to kill someone.

Huang Rong did not look at him directly but turned to Guo Jing and said, "Jing ge ge, what's the most you can lift?"

Guo Jing said, "Around 400 jin [200kg / 440lbs]." Huang Rong said, "Hmmm, how about a 1200 jin rock?" Guo Jing said, "I think not." Huang Rong said, "How about a 1200 jin rock in the water?"

Ouyang Feng realized what she meant and yelled happily, "Yes, yes, that's correct!" Guo Jing however had yet to understand it. Ouyang Feng said, "When the tide rises, it half-submerges this rock, causing it to be lighter; we'll try it again and it'll definitely work."

Huang Rong said coldly, "Yeah, but the trees will be half-submerged too; how are you going to work underwater?" Ouyang Feng bit his teeth and said, "Leave that to fate." Huang Rong said, "Hmmm, it doesn't have to be so difficult. Go tie and the branches to the rock."

When she said that, Guo Jing understood too and cheered; working together with Ouyang Feng they began tying several large branches around the rock. Ouyang Feng was afraid that the buoyancy would not be enough, so he tied seven or eight large pieces of wood together and then helped Guo Jing connect the rope that had snapped the previous day. Huang Rong stood aside and smiled, watching them work. Within two hours it was ready and the only thing lacking was the tide.

Guo Jing and Huang Rong went to visit their master. In the afternoon, the tide began to rise and Ouyang Feng ran up to inform them. The three of them went back together. After some time, the tide reached its highest level and they stood in the water and looped the rope around the oak tree. Then they operated the crisscrossed-shaped mechanism again. This time, with the pieces of wood tied to the rock, the buoyancy was quite high and it seemed like there were many strong men helping to lift the rock. The three did not use much effort to move the rock. After turning a few

rounds of rope round the tree, Ouyang Feng held his breath and pulled his nephew to the surface.

Guo Jing, knowing that they had been successful, could not help but cheer. Huang Rong clapped continuously and actually forgot that it was she who set the trap.

**End of Chapter 21.**

## Chapter 22 - Wandering on a Shark's Back

Translated by William Lee Chong Beng & Frans Soetomo





*Huang Rong sat steadily on the branch and called out, "Fire away!" Aiming toward the raft, Guo Jing released his grip and Huang Rong's body flew into the sky. She somersaulted twice in the air and plunged into the water.*

Huang Rong saw Ouyang Feng carry his mud-drenched nephew to the shore. He was beaming happily from ear to ear but he never uttered any words of gratitude to Guo Jing and her. She pulled Guo Jing's sleeve and they returned to the cave together.

Guo Jing noticed that Huang Rong had a worried expression on her face and asked her, "What are you thinking about?" Huang Rong replied, "I am thinking about three very difficult things." Guo Jing replied, "You are an intelligent person who always has a way to solve problems." Huang Rong gave a very slight laugh, but a moment later her eyebrows showed a frown again.

Hong Qigong opened his mouth to speak, "The first thing really does not matter much. The second and third things cause people to be at a loss as to what to do."

Then Guo Jing said, "Wow! You really are amazing! How would you know about the three things she's thinking about?"

Hong Qigong replied, "I simply guessed her thoughts. The first is how to cure my injury...but there is no doctor, medicine or a person with good internal energy here to help me. The Old Beggar can accept his fate with resignation and whether I live or die is not the most important matter now. The second thing is how to defend ourselves from the poisonous hands of Ouyang Feng. That person's martial arts are very solid and the two of you are definitely not his match. The third thing is...how we can return to the mainland? Rong'er, am I right or wrong?"

Huang Rong replied, "Yes, you are right. At present the most pressing matter is to think of a way to discourage the Old Poison from acting ruthlessly."

Hong Qigong said, "In short, we must have a battle of wits with him. The Old Poison may be cunning but he is hugely conceited. In fact, he is so conceited that it won't be difficult to fool him. However, after he has been tricked, he will immediately adapt and follow up with a severe counterattack."

The two gave it deep thought. Huang Rong began to think that the enemy's skill level was difficult to differentiate from her father's or teacher's. Even if her father was there, he would not necessarily defeat him. How could she fight him? It seemed that if they did not take his life in one stroke, it would only make him commit even more evil deeds.

Hong Qigong suddenly felt pain in his chest and coughed loudly. Huang Rong immediately helped him to lie down. A shadow suddenly blocked the sunlight at the mouth of the cave. She raised her head to see Ouyang Feng carrying his nephew in and making a hissing sound while saying, "All of you get out! Let me have this cave for healing my nephew's injury!"

Guo Jing was very angry as he jumped up and said, "This place belongs to my master!"

Ouyang Feng replied coldly, "Even if the Jade Emperor lived here, he too would have to leave!"

Guo Jing, furious, tried to answer him, but Huang Rong pulled his sleeve. She stooped down to help Hong Qigong up and they left the cave.

While passing Ouyang Feng's side, Hong Qigong opened his eyes and said with a mocking smile, "Impressive power... very deadly!"

Ouyang Feng's face turned red. He could have killed Hong Qigong violently with just a stroke of his palm, but for some

reason he was overwhelmed by Hong Qigong's righteous air. He shivered and did not answer this insult. He turned his head to avoid Hong Qigong's penetrating gaze and said, "Come back and bring us something to eat! If you two small creatures mess with the food, then watch out for your three lives."

The three went down the hill. Guo Jing cursed incessantly, while Huang Rong was deep in thought and did not say anything. Guo Jing said, "Master, please rest here while I go and look for a suitable place to stay."

Huang Rong had just helped Hong Qigong sit down by a big pine tree when she spotted two squirrels climbing quickly up the tree trunk then immediately climb back down again. They were only a few feet from her and watched the two people with their small round eyes. Huang Rong was fascinated; she picked a pine cone and held it out. One of the squirrels came near to sniff at the cone; then used its front paws to slowly pull the cone away. The other squirrel boldly climbed Hong Qigong's sleeve. Huang Rong sighed and said, "Nobody has been here before. Look at these two squirrels...they're not afraid of humans at all."

When the squirrels heard Huang Rong's voice they scurried up the tree. Huang Rong looked up the tree and saw dense needles growing from the branches of the pine tree. The leaves formed a canopy and the top of the tree was full of green cane. Huang Rong suddenly had an idea and called out, "Jing ge ge, there's no need to look anymore. Let's go to the top of the tree."

Guo Jing stopped and looked up the pine tree. The tree was indeed a wonderful place for a shelter. The two bent some branches and made a platform. Then, with one on either side, they sat Hong Qigong on their hands and shouted,

“Heave!”. They flew up and put Hong Qigong safely on the platform they just made.

Huang Rong laughed and said, “We are living on branches like birds. Let them live in the cave like beasts.”

Then Guo Jing said, “Rong’er, do you want to send them food or not?”

Huang Rong said, “Since I cannot think of any wonderful plan to defeat the Old Poison at the moment, I think we’d better comply with his request.” Guo Jing continued to grumble.

The two wandered around a mountain and managed to catch a wild goat. Then they made a fire at the base of the tree to roast the goat. The roasted goat was then torn in two. Huang Rong took one piece of the meat and threw it on the ground and said, “Urinate on the meat!”

Guo Jiang laughed, “They’ll find out.”

Huang Rong said, “Don’t worry about that...just do it.”

Guo Jing blushed and said, “I can’t do it!”

Huang Rong asked, “Why?”

Guo Jing mumbled, “I can’t urinate with you beside me.” Huang Rong burst out in laughter.

From the top of the tree Hong Qigong called out, “Throw the meat up here! I will urinate on it myself!” Guo Jing laughed, took the meat and leaped up to the platform so that Hong Qigong could urinate on it. Hong Qigong urinated a lot on the goat meat. Guo Jing laughed loudly then carried the meat towards the cave.

Huang Rong called, “No! Take this one.”

Guo Jing scratched his head and said, "That's the clean one."

Huang Rong said, "That's right. We are going to offer them the clean meat."

Guo Jing was confused, but he usually listened to whatever Huang Rong said. He came back and took the clean goat meat. Huang Rong took the urine-soaked meat and put it back on the fire while she went out to pick edible wild fruits. Hong Qigong did not understand Huang Rong's plan and was upset. He'd drooled over the meat, but all that was left was the one soaked with his own urine. He had no choice but to be patient.

The roasted goat released a very good aroma. Inside the cave Ouyang Feng had smelled that wonderful aroma. Without waiting for Guo Jing to arrive he went out of the cave and snatched the meat as his face showed how pleased he was at the moment. Then a thought came into his mind. "Where is the other half?" he asked. Guo Jing pointed his finger.

Ouyang Feng walked in big strides towards the pine tree. He snatched the urine soaked meat and threw the clean meat on the ground. He laughed coldly before turning around to leave.

Guo Jing knew that he must not show anything suspicious on his face. However, it was not in his nature to pretend, so he was forced to turn around and dared not look at Ouyang Feng. He waited for Ouyang Feng to get far away before rushing to Huang Rong. He laughed and said, "How did you know that he would come and exchange the meat?"

Huang Rong smiled and said, "According to military tactics, void is actually solid, while solid is actually void. The Old Poison knew that we would try something with the food and

did not want to be tricked. So I just let him trick himself.” Guo Jing listened to all of this in awe while tearing the clean goat meat into smaller pieces before taking it up to the shelter they’d made. The three ate the meat.

While they were happily eating, Guo Jing suddenly said, “Rong’er, you really came up with a wonderful ruse just now. Nevertheless, it was a dangerous one.”

Huang Rong immediately asked, “Why?”

Guo Jing replied, “If the Old Poison had not come and exchanged the meat, wouldn’t we be eating the meat soaked in master’s urine?”

Huang Rong, who sat on a branch while listening to Guo Jing’s words, bent over laughing loudly and tumbled down from the tree. Then she leaped back up into the tree unharmed and said, “Very, very dangerous indeed.”

Hong Qigong sighed and said, “Dumb child, if he didn’t come to exchange the meat, then you just don’t eat the tainted meat.”

Guo Jing was startled at the truth of the statement and let out a loud laugh before falling down from the tree as well.

As Ouyang Feng and nephew ate the meat, they thought the wild goat meat had a urine-like smell to it, but they did not suspect anything. In fact, they praised Huang Rong’s wonderful skill in roasting the meat and giving the meat a salty taste. Not long after, the sky began to turn dark. It was at this moment that Ouyang Ke’s wounds started to ache, causing him to groan loudly.

Ouyang Feng walked out towards the pine tree and called out, “Come down little girl!”

Huang Rong was startled because she did not expect Ouyang Feng to come that soon. She asked, "What is it?"

Ouyang Feng answered, "My nephew needs tea and water. Quickly go and serve him now." The people in the tree listened to everything and could not help but feel very angry. Ouyang Feng shouted angrily, "Hurry up! What are you waiting for?"

Guo Jing whispered, "Let's fight him."

Hong Qigong added, "The two of you run quickly towards the back of the mountain. Don't worry about me."

Huang Rong had already calculated carefully the two choices that they had now. Whether they should flee and allow their master's life to be lost...or duel with Ouyang Feng. The only thing that could be done now was to compromise for their master's safety. She leaped down from the tree and said, "Alright, let me go and have a look at his wounds."

Ouyang Feng sneered and said, "The boy surnamed Guo... come down and follow me. Are you still soundly asleep? I have a good idea you're not." Guo Jing, swallowing his anger, leaped down from the tree.

Ouyang Feng said, "Go get a hundred logs for me before the night ends. If you are short by one log, I will break one of your legs. If you are short two logs, I will break both of your legs."

Huang Rong asked, "What do you want with the logs? Besides, how are we going to see where we're going in the dark?"

Ouyang Feng cursed her, "You talk too much girl! What does this have to do with you? Go quickly and attend to my



nephew. If there is something amiss or wrong, all of you will suffer the consequences!"

Huang Rong gave Guo Jing a hand signal telling him not to make things worse. Guo Jing watched Ouyang Feng and Huang Rong's shadows disappear in the darkness. He was so angry that tears flowed from his eyes.

Hong Qigong suddenly said, "When I was young, my grandpa, my father and I were slaves of the Jin. What is this hardship compared to what we went through?"

Guo Jing was startled and he came to his senses, "It turns out that my benevolent master was once a slave, but later he mastered a matchless martial art. Although I feel wronged today, can't I just endure it patiently?" Guo Jing then leaped down from the tree and lit a tree branch before heading towards the back-side of the mountain. He used the 'Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms', hacking down trees as big as a rice bowl in diameter. He was fully aware that Huang Rong would be able to escape from harm, just like the day she was surrounded by a bunch of criminals at the Zhao palace. No matter how difficult the situation, she somehow managed to escape unharmed. Therefore, he concentrated his attention and energy on cutting down trees.

Using the 'Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms' took a lot of his energy. After a while he started to feel strained and numb. In less than an hour Guo Jing managed to knock down twenty one pine trees. By the time he knocked down the twenty-second tree, Guo Jing's arm was sore and tired. When he launched the 'Seeing the Dragon in the Field', his palm strokes were uneven and though branches and leaves shook, the trunk swayed but did not break. He felt his chest tightening. The energy did not flow to his palm, but went in reverse to his chest. His master had repeatedly warned him

about this condition. The 'Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms' carried tremendous force, but if his own strength was not sufficient, he would suffer a tremendous self-inflicted injury. He was shocked, immediately sat down, and focused his mind on controlling his breathing. After about an hour he struck that tree again, but his body was worn out and his arms and legs were weak.

Guo Jing knew that if he forced himself to exert more strength, not only would it still be difficult to accomplish his task, but he would suffer internal injuries as well. On this desolate island there was no saber or hatchet...how would he be able to chop down more trees? He noticed that out of the hundred logs needed he was still about eighty logs short and his legs were about ready to give out. He thought aloud, "His nephews legs are crushed... he must hate me to my guts. Even if I manage to give him a hundred logs tonight, tomorrow night he will require a thousand. When will it end? We can't fight him and on this desolate island there's nobody to help us." Having thought about this he heaved a long sigh, "Here we are stuck on this island...who in the world would come to rescue us? Benevolent master Hong has lost his martial arts and whether he will live or die is difficult to tell. Rong'er's father despises me. All of the Quanzhen Seven Masters and my six benevolent masters are not the Western Poison's match. If only ... if only my sworn brother Zhou Botong was here ... but he killed himself by jumping into the sea earlier." As soon as Zhou Botong came into his mind, he hated Ouyang Feng even more. He thought of that old sworn brother of his, who was skilled in the 'Nine Yin Manual', who had created the 'Mutual Hands Combat technique', and was forced to his death by Ouyang Feng.

"Ah...the 'Nine Yin Manual'...the 'Mutual Hands Combat technique'!" These words flashed through his mind like

seeing a bright star on the horizon on a dark and endless night. "My martial arts may not be enough to fight the Western Poison, but the 'Nine Yin Manual' contains the most wonderful secrets of the martial arts world and the 'Mutual Hands Combat technique' will double my skills. If Rong'er and I train hard day and night, then we can fight the Old Poison with everything we have. Regardless of which martial arts we use, we will still need to fight him for a whole day and night; how can that be good?"

He stood in the forest thinking deeply and suddenly thought, "Why don't I ask Master? His martial arts might be gone, but his knowledge is not; he should be able to give me clear directions." He went back to the tree right away and explained to Hong Qigong every single one of his thoughts.

"Recite the 'Nine Yin Manual' slowly for me to hear," Hong Qigong suggested, "Let's see if there is a marvelous martial art you can learn in a short period of time. Guo Jing immediately recited the manual sentence by sentence. When Hong Qigong heard Guo Jing reciting, 'One knows that by sitting down and pondering deeply one can accomplish virtue; but to unknowingly attain excellence one requires flexibility, as well as clear and bright understanding. The body is cultivated two-fold; namely movement and stillness. When being attacked, stay still.' He suddenly stood up, "Ah!" he exclaimed.

"What is it?" Guo Jing worriedly asked. Hong Qigong did not answer. He thought those sentences over for a while and then said, "Repeat the last part you were reciting a moment ago."

Guo Jing was delighted and thought, "Master must have found some method to fight the Old Poison in the last part." Right away he slowly recited those sentences.

Hong Qigong nodded his head and said, "That's true. Carry on." Guo Jing continued reciting the manual from memory. Towards the end he recited, "Mo han si ge er, pin te huo ji en, jin qie hu si, ge shan ni ke ..."

Hong Qigong was baffled, "What are you saying?"

Guo Jing answered, "Big Brother Zhou told me to memorize those sentences."

Hong Qigong frowned, "What do they mean?" he asked.

"I don't know," Guo Jing replied, "Big Brother Zhou himself did not understand them."

"Carry on, then," Hong Qigong said.

Guo Jing continued, "Bie er fa si, ge luo wu li ..." until he came to the end, reciting all kinds of these tongue-twisting sentences.

"Hmm," Hong Qigong said, "It seems the manual also contains some incantations to catch ghosts." He wanted to add, "Crafty priest, fooling people with cheap tricks," but remembered that the manual contained an extensive profound mystery. This mumbo-jumbo must have a deep meaning and for the time being, he simply did not understand it. As the words were about to leave his lips, he swallowed them back. After a long while Hong Qigong shook his head, "Jing'er," he said, "There are many marvelous martial arts in the manual, but none of them can be mastered in one day and night."

Guo Jing was disappointed. Hong Qigong continued, "Quickly, go and build a raft with those twenty logs, then go away as far as you can. Rong'er and I will stay here and devise a plan to deal with the Old Poison."

"No," Guo Jing quickly said, "How can I leave you, Senior?"

Hong Qigong sighed, "The Western Poison is afraid of the Old Heretic Huang, he won't harm Rong'er. In any case the Old Beggar is an invalid. Go quickly!"

Guo Jing was struck with grief and indignation; he raised his hand and struck the tree trunk with his palm.

This strike was extremely heavy and the sound echoed from the mountain and valley. Hong Qigong was startled and quickly asked, "Jing'er, the palm you launched...what technique did you use?"

"Why?" Guo Jing was perplexed.

"You hit very hard, but the trunk did not even shake," Hong Qigong said.

Guo Jing was very embarrassed, "I used up all my strength striking down trees and my hands are very sore; I don't have any more strength left," he said.

"No, no," Hong Qigong shook his head, "Your palm technique was a little strange. Strike again!"

Raising his hand he struck the tree with his palm. The sound shook the forest, but the tree did not budge. Suddenly it dawned on him. "That was from the seventy-two stance 'Vacant Fist' Big Brother Zhou taught your disciple."

"'Vacant Fist'...I have never heard of it," Hong Qigong mused.

"That's right," Guo Jing said, "Big Brother Zhou was held prisoner on Peach Blossom Island. He had nothing to do, so he invented this technique. He taught me the sixteen-character secret of the technique: 'empty and hazy like a loose cave, the wind blows carrying a dream, playing around with power or exhaustion, a child can use a worm as

a weapon' [kong meng dong song, feng tong rong meng, chong qiong zhong nong, tong yong gong chong]"

Hong Qigong laughed, "What kind of empty hole?" he asked. [Play on words here, Hong Qigong said 'tong nong ku long' which rhymes with whatever Guo Jing was saying. I can't translate it properly.]

Guo Jing explained, "Each one of those sixteen characters has its own meaning. The word 'song' [loose] means the fist must be devoid of strength; 'chong' [worm] means the body must be flexible like a worm; 'meng' [hazy] means the fist movement must be obscure, must not be too clear. Disciple will play it out for you to watch, tell me what you think?"

"The night is so dark and I can't see anything," Hong Qigong said, "Why don't you explain it to me? This is an excellent martial art; I don't have to see it in order to understand it."

Guo Jing explained from the first stance, 'Empty Bowl Filled with Rice' [kong wan cheng fan], to the second stance, 'Empty House Occupied with People' [kong wu zhu ren], and all variations therein, including how to send out the force, to Hong Qigong.

By nature Zhou Botong was mischievous, so he gave each and every stance a funny name. Hong Qigong had only heard up to the eighteenth stance and his heart was already filled with admiration. He cut Guo Jing off, "You don't need to continue, I have found a way to fight the Western Poison."

"With the 'Vacant Fist'?" Guo Jing asked, "I am afraid the disciple's skill is insufficient."

"I know that," Hong Qigong said, "But we are in a desperate situation; we have to take a risk. Do you still have

the dagger Qiu Chuji gave to you?" A cold light flashed in the dark night as Guo Jing took out his dagger. Hong Qigong said, "With the 'Vacant Fist technique', use this dagger to cut down some trees." Guo Jing held his dagger by the hilt, the thin blade was only about one foot long. He was doubtful but did not say anything.

Hong Qigong said, "The 'Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms' I passed on to you is the pinnacle of the external types of martial arts; that 'Vacant Fist' is a very profound inner type of martial arts. Your dagger can cut through metal and carve jade; what would the problem be of cutting a tree trunk? The important thing is, your hand strength must follow the 'Empty' [kong] and 'Loose' [song] principles."

Guo Jing pondered it for a long time. Hong Qigong also gave him some more directions. Finally he understood. He jumped down from the tree and went to find a medium size pine tree. With the 'Vacant Fist' method of exerting energy, using force without force, he lightly struck the trunk and, sure enough, the dagger went through the tree trunk. He exerted his strength and cut around the trunk and that tree fell down immediately. Guo Jing was ecstatic; using the same method he cut down dozens of trees one after another. It seemed before daybreak he would be able to cut down a hundred logs.

While he was still cutting down trees, he heard Hong Qigong suddenly call out, "Jing'er, come up here."

Guo Jing leaped up to the platform. "It really worked," he said, "I did not even use very much energy."

"Certainly we can't waste our energy, can we?" Hong Qigong said.

"That's right! That's right!" Guo Jing exclaimed, "Now I understand the 'kong meng dong song' principle. Big

Brother Zhou explained it to me, but I did not understand it.”

“This martial art is more than enough to cut down trees,” Hong Qigong said, “But it is still far from adequate for fighting the Western Poison. You must train with the ‘Nine Yin Manual’ again, only then will you have a chance to defeat him. Let us think of some way to buy time.” Speaking about plans and strategies, Guo Jing could only stay silent, letting his master do the thinking.

After a long time, Hong Qigong shook his head and said, “I can’t think of anything good. Let’s wait until tomorrow, perhaps Rong’er can come up with some clever ideas. Jing’er, listening to you reciting the ‘Nine Yin Manual’ I had a thought and I believe I am not wrong. Help me get down from this tree...I am going to practice my martial arts.”

Guo Jing was shocked. “Your injury has not healed yet, how can you train?” he asked.

Hong Qigong answered, “The manual said, ‘The body is cultivated two-fold; namely movement and stillness. When attacked, stay still.’ Those sentences have opened my eyes. Let’s go down.”

Guo Jing did not understand the meaning of those sentences, but he did not dare to defy his master. Therefore he lifted his master and gently jumped down from the tree.

Hong Qigong calmed himself...then opened his arms and launched a palm strike. In the darkness Guo Jing saw his master’s body stagger forward like he was falling down. Guo Jing rushed forward to help, but Hong Qigong had already steadied himself. His breathing was heavy, but he said, “I am alright.”



A moment later he launched a left palm strike. Guo Jing saw him stagger, his feet stumbled and he appeared to be extremely exhausted. Guo Jing fought the urge to rush forward and help his master. Who would have thought that the more Hong Qigong practiced, the stronger he became. Initially he had to catch his breath after every single stance he launched, but later he was able to launch several stances in succession. His steps were getting steadier as well. It was a tremendous improvement. Hong Qigong launched the whole set of the 'Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms', followed by a set of the 'Crouching Tiger Fist' [fu hu quan].

Guo Jing waited until he finished, then he shouted happily, "You are healed!"

"Help me back up," Hong Qigong said.

Guo Jing wrapped his arm around his master's waist and jumped up to the platform. His delight was unspeakable, he mumbled repeatedly, "Very good...very good!"

Hong Qigong sighed and said, "Not so good, these martial arts are only good to watch, but they're actually useless." Guo Jing did not understand and Hong Qigong explained, "After suffering an injury, all I did was rest, trying to recuperate. It never occurred to me that my martial arts are of the external type; the more I move the better. It's too bad I realized it way too late; now my life will be spared, but my martial arts will be very difficult to restore."

Guo Jing wanted to offer some words of comfort, but he did not know what to say. After a while he simply said, "I'll go down and chop some more trees."

"Jing'er," Hong Qigong suddenly said, "I think I have an idea to intimidate the Old Poison. Let's see if you agree with me." Then he explained his idea. Guo Jing was delighted,

“Splendid! Splendid!” he exclaimed; and immediately jumped down from the tree to make preparations.

Early in the morning of next day, Ouyang Feng came to the tree. He counted the logs Guo Jing chopped down and found only ninety of them. He coldly laughed and shouted, “Little bastard [za zhong]! Get down here quickly! Where are the other ten?”

Huang Rong had spent the entire night by Ouyang Ke’s side, tending his injuries. Listening to his pitiful groaning she felt sorry for him. That morning as Ouyang Feng left the cave, she followed behind. Hearing his loud shouts, she worried for Guo Jing.

Ouyang Feng waited for a moment, but nothing was heard from the tree above, except some gust of winds coming from a distant hill. It sounded like somebody was practicing martial arts. He hastily followed the source of the sounds. When he rounded the hillside, what he saw surprised him. Hong Qigong was sparring with Guo Jing; palms and kicks flew towards each other...they were engaged in a close fight.

Huang Rong saw that her master was not only able to walk unaided, but it seemed his skills were restored as well...she was pleasantly surprised. She heard him shout, “Jing’er, be careful of this next stance!” and he launched a palm.

Guo Jing raised his palm to parry, but before their palms met his body flew backwards and ‘bang!’ he hit a pine tree. That tree was not too big, about a rice bowl in diameter; ‘crack!’ and it was snapped by the strength of Hong Qigong’s push and fell to the ground.

This strike seemed ordinary, but it was enough to stun Ouyang Feng. Huang Rong praised, “Master, that was a great ‘Hacking Empty Air Palm technique’ [pi kong zhang]!”

“Jing’er, protect your body well; don’t let my palm strength injure you!” Hong Qigong called out.

“Disciple understands,” Guo Jing replied. He was just closing his mouth as Hong Qigong’s palm arrived. ‘Crack!’ again Guo Jing was sent flying, again bumping into a tree. Palm after palm came one after another; in a short period of time Hong Qigong had used the ‘Hacking Empty Air Palm’ to send Guo Jing flying and knocking down ten big trees.

“We have ten trees already!” Huang Rong called out.

Guo Jing gasped for breath. “Disciple is exhausted,” he said.

Hong Qigong held his palm and laughed, “This ‘Nine Yin Manual’ is really wonderful. My injury was heavy and I couldn’t even exert any strength, yet I achieved success with just one morning’s exercise.”

Ouyang Feng was suspicious; he stooped down to examine the broken tree trunks and what he saw stunned him. Apart from the heart of the trunk, the outer rings were exceptionally smooth, even smoother than if the trunk was sawn. He thought, “Could it be that the martial arts in the manual is this marvelous? It looks like the Old Beggar’s martial arts have been completely restored. How can I fight them if the three gang up on me? I’ve been lucky so far, I’d better start training myself in the martial arts from that manual.” He cast a glance towards the three and then flew back to the cave in a hurry. He immediately fetched the book Guo Jing wrote, unwrapped layer upon layer of oil papers from the bundle and straightaway buried his head in the book, diligently studying the manual.

Hong Qigong and Guo Jing waited until they could not see Ouyang Feng anymore before both of them burst out laughing. Huang Rong was delighted, “Master, this manual is truly wonderful,” she said.

Hong Qigong laughed without giving her a response. Guo Jing rushed to her and said, "Rong'er, we were only pretending." Then he told her everything they had thought of and done. It turned out that Guo Jing had used his knife to cut around the trunks, leaving the center intact. Hong Qigong's palm actually did not carry any strength at all and every time Guo Jing got hit, he used his own strength to fly backwards and bump into a tree, breaking it. Ouyang Feng did not know that with the 'Vacant Fist' energy, the dagger was capable of cutting deep into the tree trunk; naturally he did not suspect that the cut was made by the knife.

Huang Rong was laughing hard, but after hearing Guo Jing's story, she was silent for quite a while with a deep frown on her face. Hong Qigong smiled and said, "The Old Beggar is once again capable of walking on my own feet; it is truly a blessing from Heaven. I don't care if it was true martial arts or fake. Rong'er, you are afraid the Western Poison will see through this deception, aren't you?" Huang Rong nodded. "The Old Poison has good eyesight," Hong Qigong continued, "How could we fool him that easily? But life is full of uncertainties, right now it is useless to worry over nothing. Hear me out: Jing'er recited the contents of the manual to me. There is a section which was called 'Changing Muscle Forging Bones' [yi jin duan gu pian] or something; I thought it was very interesting. Since we don't have anything else to do, why don't we practice it?"

These words were said with offhanded gentleness, but Huang Rong was aware of the urgency of the situation. What their master had said was very reasonable, therefore she said, "Very well, Master, please teach us."

Hong Qigong asked Guo Jing to recite the 'Changing Muscle Forging Bones' twice, then, based on that, he taught the two how to practice it. He went out hunting and fishing himself as well as lighting the fire and cooking their meals.

Several times Guo Jing and Huang Rong offered to help, but he shoos them away every time.

Seven days quickly passed and Guo Jing and Huang Rong made some progress in terms of their energy cultivation. Inside his cave Ouyang Feng was also painstakingly studying his manual and putting all his efforts into doing so. Towards the evening of the eighth day Hong Qigong smiled and said, "Rong'er...how was your Master's roasted wild goat?"

Huang Rong smiled but did not say anything, she simply shook her head. Hong Qigong laughed, "I can't eat it myself either. You two have finished the first part of your lesson; today you must rest your muscles and bones, otherwise your 'qi' will be obstructed and you will suffer an injury. Ok Rong'er, you prepare our meal tonight; Jing'er and I will go and build a raft."

Guo Jing and Huang Rong were astonished, "Build a raft?"

"That's right," Hong Qigong said, "Do you want to stay with the Old Poison on this deserted island forever?"

Guo Jing and Huang Rong were delighted; they both voiced their agreement and started to work immediately.

The hundred logs Guo Jing cut down were piled neatly at one side. They cut the tree's bark, wove it into ropes and tied the logs together to make the raft. When Guo Jing used his strength to pull the rope, it broke. He thought the rope was not made strong enough. He tried pulling another rope, but as soon as he exerted a little strength, it also broke easily. Guo Jing was baffled; he stared blankly at the rope and did not know what to do.

From the other side of the hill Huang Rong ran shouting with a wild goat in her hands. When going out to hunt for

the goat she carried some pebbles to herd the goat with; who would have thought that with only several jumps she had already overtaken the goat. She twisted around and grabbed the wild goat. Her body movements were so swift that she even surprised herself.

Hong Qigong smiled, "So the 'Nine Yin Manual' is truly a wonderful manual; no wonder countless heroes and warriors were willing to risk their lives for it."

Huang Rong was delighted, "Master, do you think we can beat the Old Poison now?" she asked.

Hong Qigong shook his head, "Not yet, you are still far from that," he replied, "You'll have to train for another eight to ten years. His Toad Stance is not a small matter; no martial art can break it except Wang Chongyang's Solitary Yang Finger.

Huang Rong pouted and said, "Then even if we train for another eight to ten years we might still not be able to defeat him."

"That's hard to say," Hong Qigong said, "Perhaps the martial arts in that book are fiercer than I think."

"Rong'er, please be patient," Guo Jing said, "There is nothing wrong with learning a new skill."

A few more days passed and Guo Jing and Huang Rong finished the second part of the 'Changing Muscles Forging Bones'. The raft was also ready. The three of them wove a sail from tree bark and they also prepared some fresh water and food on the raft. All along Ouyang Feng acted indifferent to what they were doing; he simply watched their activities with a cold look.

One evening everything was ready so they planned on sailing the next day. Just before bed that night Huang Rong asked, "Do we have to say goodbye to them?"

"Not only that, we must make a ten year agreement with them," Guo Jing answered, "They have bullied us badly; how can we just forget it?"

Huang Rong clapped her hands and said, "Absolutely! I pray to Heaven to bless those two thieves so that they can go back to the mainland, and also to give the Old Poison ten more years of life; or perhaps to restore Master's martial arts quickly, so that in one or two years we can hunt for him. That would be even better."

The next day before the crack of dawn Hong Qigong awoke; he indistinctly heard some noises from the shore. He quickly called, "Jing'er, did you hear that noise from the beach?"

Guo Jing got up immediately and jumped down from the tree. Once he saw what was happening on the beach he could not stop cursing; he immediately rushed forward in pursuit. By this time Huang Rong also awoke and ran after him, calling out, "Jing ge ge, what's the matter?"

Guo Jing shouted from the distance, "Those wicked thieves stole our raft." Hearing this, Huang Rong was shocked.

By the time they got to the beach Ouyang Feng had already carried his nephew out to the raft, raised the sail and was already several zhang [1 zhang = 3.3m or 11ft] away from land. Guo Jing was furious and was about to jump into the ocean to pursue, but Huang Rong pulled his sleeve and said, "They are already too far."

Ouyang Feng roared with laughter, "Many thanks for the raft!" he shouted.

Stomping his feet with rage, Guo Jing furiously kicked a red sandalwood tree nearby. Huang Rong suddenly had an idea, "I've got it!" she called out. She took a big rock and placed it in the tree branches. She wanted to use the tree as a slingshot. "Pull on this tree," she said, "and we'll hurl the rock."

Guo Jing was delighted. He braced his legs on the tree's base and pulled the trunk backward with all his might. Sandalwood trees are strong but supple; it bent almost completely down to the ground but did not break. Guo Jing let go and with a whooshing sound the big rock flew out to sea and fell near the raft's side, creating a zhang high big splash.

"What a pity!" Huang Rong called out. She took another rock, aimed carefully and let go. This time the rock hit the raft dead on, but the raft's construction was too good and it did not break. The two launched three more rocks, but all of them fell into the water.

Watching all their rocks miss the target, Huang Rong had a crazy idea. "Quick, use me as the rock!" she shouted. Guo Jing was startled, unclear of what she meant. Huang Rong explained, "Hurl me out to sea; I'll deal with them."

Guo Jing knew her water skills were excellent, her lightness kungfu was excellent as well; he saw no danger in complying with her request. He drew his knife and put it in her hand. "Be careful," he said. He pulled the tree one more time. Huang Rong sat steadily on a branch and called out, "Fire away!"

Guo Jing released his grip and Huang Rong's body flew into the sky. She somersaulted twice in the air and plunged into the water several zhang away from the raft. It was a beautiful sight to behold. Ouyang Feng and his nephew



were dazzled and they didn't know what she was going to do.

Huang Rong went deep into the water. She did not emerge, but swam underwater towards the raft instead. Once she saw a black shadow overhead she knew she had arrived at the bottom of the raft. Ouyang Feng randomly hit the water with the oar, but he could not hit her.

Huang Rong held up the dagger, ready to sever the ropes tying the wooden raft together; then she suddenly came up with a bright idea. She reduced the strength of her hand only partly cutting the ropes, leaving a third intact; that way the raft would not break apart until the rough waves of the open sea hit it. She turned around and swam away, emerging on the surface about a dozen zhang away; she gasped for breath, pretending she could not catch the raft. Ouyang Feng laughed wildly and hoisted the sail. Not too long afterwards the raft was far away.

While waiting for her to arrive back at the beach, Hong Qigong and Guo Jing cursed continuously; but then they saw Huang Rong's smug expression and were puzzled. After hearing what had happened, they were delighted to no end. "Even though we are sending those two wicked men to the bottom of the sea, we will have to start the work over again," Huang Rong said.

The three ate their meal in high spirits; then they cut logs again and built another raft. Several days later they were ready, and when the southeast wind blew, they hoisted the tree bark sail and left the island heading to the west. Huang Rong gazed towards the island, which was getting smaller and smaller, she sighed and said, "Our lives were almost lost on that island; but leaving it today, my heart is filled with sadness."

“We can always revisit the island in the future,” Guo Jing said.

Huang Rong clapped her hands and said, “Good! We must come back. When that time comes, you can’t go back on your word. But first, let’s give this small island a good name. Master, what do you think?”

“You crushed that little bastard’s legs with a big rock on that island,” Hong Qigong said, “Let us call it ‘Crushing Ghost Island’ [ya gui dao]. What do you say?”

Huang Rong shook her head. “That is not very elegant.”

“If you want elegance, why ask the Old Beggar in the first place?” Hong Qigong said, “If you ask me, since the Old Poison ate my urine on the island, I say we call it ‘Eat Urine Island’ [chi sui dao].”

Huang Rong smiled with a negative wave of her hand; she leaned her head to one side to think. She saw a group of red clouds on the horizon, like a cluster of gems hovering gloriously over the island. “Let’s call it ‘Bright Red Cloud Island’ [ming xia dao]!” she called out.

“Not good, not good!” Hong Qigong countered, “That was too elegant.”

Guo Jing listened to the master and disciple arguing; he smiled and did not say anything. He did not care whether the island had an elegant name or a vulgar name; but deep down in his heart he thought ‘ya gui’ or ‘chi sui’ were more interesting than ‘ming xia’.

Carried by the blowing wind they sailed for two days and the wind did not change its course. Towards the evening of the third day Hong Qigong and Huang Rong were asleep while Guo Jing kept charge of the rudder for the night.

Amid the ocean breeze and rolling waves he suddenly heard somebody shout, "Help! Help!" twice. The voice sounded like clashing cymbals and it could be heard clearly amidst the blowing wind and waves.

Hong Qigong sat up and said in a low voice, "That's the Old Poison." They heard the shout one more time and Huang Rong grabbed Hong Qigong's arm, "It's a ghost...it's a ghost!" she said with a trembling voice. It was the end of the sixth month and the night was dark and moonless; there were only a few stars scattered sparsely in the dark night. The sea was pitch-black and a scream in the middle of the night would make anybody terrified.

"Is that the Old Poison?" Hong Qigong called out. His internal energy was lost, so his voice did not travel too far. Guo Jing gathered the 'qi' on his 'dan tian' and called out, "Is that Uncle Ouyang?"

From the distance they heard Ouyang Feng answer, "It is me, Ouyang Feng. Help!"

Huang Rong was still terrified, "It doesn't matter whether it's a man or a ghost, let's just leave, quickly!"

"Help him," Hong Qigong suddenly said.

"No, no!" Huang Rong quickly answered, "I am afraid."

"It's not a ghost," Hong Qigong said.

"Even if it is a man we still don't have to help," Huang Rong said.

"Helping others in distress is one of our Beggar Clan rules," Hong Qigong said, "You and I are two generations of Clan Leaders; we can't abandon the honorable customs handed down from previous generations' leaders."

"The Beggar Clan's custom is not right," Huang Rong countered, "Ouyang Feng is clearly a scoundrel; when he becomes a ghost, he will be a scoundrel ghost. It doesn't matter if it is a man or a ghost, we should not help."

"It is the Clan's regulation; we can't change it," Hong Qigong said.

In her heart Huang Rong was very angry. They heard Ouyang Feng's voice in the distance again, "Brother Qi [Qi Xiong], are you really 'seeing death, but do not help' [jian si bu jiu]?"

Huang Rong said, "I've got it! Jing ge ge, wait until you can see Ouyang Feng clearly, then strike him dead with your stick. You are not a Beggar Clan member; you don't have to observe this unreasonable rule."

Hong Qigong was angry, "Is taking advantage of somebody else's precarious condition the way of the righteous warrior?"

Huang Rong did not have a choice. She watched helplessly as Guo Jing steered the raft towards the voice. In the deep darkness of the night they vaguely saw two men in the water rocked by the waves; next to their heads were logs. It seemed that after their raft broke up, Ouyang Feng and his nephew had clung onto the logs until now.

"Let him swear an oath never to harm anybody else, then we will rescue him," Huang Rong said.

Hong Qigong sighed, "You don't know the Old Poison's character; he would rather die than surrender. He won't make that kind of promise. Jing'er, rescue them."

Guo Jing bent down and grabbed Ouyang Ke's collar and lifted him up onto the raft. Hong Qigong was eager to help

and he forgot his martial arts were gone. He held out his hand and Ouyang Feng took it. He wanted to borrow strength and leap to the raft; but because of his pull Hong Qigong fell unexpectedly into the sea with a splash. Guo Jing and Huang Rong were shocked; they immediately jumped into the sea and saved Hong Qigong. Huang Rong angrily scolded Ouyang Feng, "My Master has a good heart and wanted to rescue you; how could you drag him into the sea like that?"

Ouyang Feng now knew Hong Qigong had lost his martial arts; otherwise, how could his simple pull make a martial arts expert fall into the sea? But he had been immersed in the water for several days and he was extremely weary. He did not dare to look at them; he lowered his head and said, "I ... I did not mean to. Brother Qi [Qi Xiong], please don't blame your brother."

Hong Qigong laughed heartily, "Well said, well said. But now the Old Beggar's real skills are known to you," he said.

"Good Miss," Ouyang Feng said, "Could you spare something for us to eat? We haven't eaten for several days."

Huang Rong replied, "We only have food and water enough for three people on this raft. I can give you some, but what do we eat?"

"Very well," Ouyang Feng said, "Please give a little bit of food to my nephew then; his legs are severely injured and he won't survive without food."

"In that case let's make a deal," Huang Rong said, "Your viper injured my Master; he has not recovered. Give him the antidote."

Ouyang Feng groped in his pocket and produced two vials; handing them over to her and said, "Miss, please take a

look; the vials were submerged in the water and the antidote has been washed out!”

Huang Rong took the vials, shook them, and sniffed them; the vials really were filled with seawater. “In that case, tell us ingredients for the antidote; as soon as we are ashore we can prepare some.”

“If I wanted to swindle you, I could just tell you some ingredients and you wouldn’t know if it is genuine or fake; but how can Ouyang Feng be that kind of person?” Then he said, “Let me tell you the truth: my vipers are the most poisonous in the world; nothing can match their lethality. If one is bitten, although you won’t die immediately due to one’s excellence in martial arts, within sixty-four days half of your body will be paralyzed and you will be an invalid for the rest of your life. I have no problem about giving you the antidote ingredients, but not only are the ingredients hard to find, it also requires processing for three successive winters and summers. By the time the antidote is ready, I am afraid it will be much too late. I have told you the truth; if you still want to take my life that is entirely up to you.”

Huang Rong and Guo Jing listened to him and secretly admired him; they thought, “Although this man is evil and cruel, in a matter of life and death he did not lose his honor as the grand master of his martial arts school.”

“Rong’er,” Hong Qigong said, “He is telling the truth. A man’s life has been decided by fate; the Old Beggar has nothing to be worried about. You give them something to eat.”

Inwardly Huang Rong’s heart was crushed and she knew her master would not recover from his injury. Silently she took a roasted wild goat leg and tossed it towards Ouyang

Feng. Ouyang Feng first tore some meat off for his nephew before he took a big bite and chewed the meat.

Huang Rong said coldly, "Uncle Ouyang, you have injured my master; at the second Sword Meet of Mount Hua you will be the winner amongst the heroes. Let me be the first to congratulate you."

"That is not necessarily true," Ouyang Feng replied, "There is at least one other person in this whole wide world who can heal Brother Qi's injury."

Guo Jing and Huang Rong jumped up in shock so that the raft leaned to one side. They both asked in unison, "Is that true?"

While biting the goat leg Ouyang Feng said, "But it is very difficult to ask this person to help. Your Master also knows about it."

The two's eyes turned to their master. Hong Qigong smiled, "You know it is difficult...why did you mention it?"

Huang Rong tugged her master's sleeve, asking for an explanation, "Master, tell us. Even if it is difficult, we still have to try. I will ask my father to help; surely he'll find a way." Ouyang Feng snorted softly. "What are you snorting about?" Huang Rong said. Ouyang Feng did not answer.

Hong Qigong said, "He was laughing at you for thinking your father is all powerful. Finding that person is not a small matter, so how could your father convince that person to help?"

Huang Rong was astonished, "That person! Who is that person?"

Hong Qigong continued, "Let's not talk about that person's high level of martial arts skills. Even if he was so weak that

he couldn't even kill a chicken, the Old Beggar will never harm someone to benefit myself."

Huang Rong hesitantly said, "High level of martial arts skills? Ah! I know. He is the Southern Emperor, Emperor Duan. Master, let's ask him to heal your injury, how does that harm others to benefit yourself?"

"Go to sleep and don't ask any more questions! I forbid you to bring up this matter again. Understand?" Hong Qigong said. Huang Rong did not dare to say more. She was afraid Ouyang Feng might steal their food, so she leaned against the food basket and slept.

Waking early the next morning Huang Rong looked at Ouyang Feng and his nephew; she jumped in fright because their complexions were very pale and their bodies swollen from being in seawater these past several days.

The raft sailed until about the ninth hour [3-5pm] when they saw a dark line in the distance. It appeared to be land. Guo Jing was the first to jump up and shout in delight. In the time needed to eat a bowl of rice they could see more clearly; it was indeed land. The sea was calm and the sun shone brightly, scorching these people and making them miserable. Ouyang Feng suddenly stood up; he swayed a little bit and stretched out his hands and grabbed both Guo Jing and Huang Rong. With the tip of his foot he also kicked and sealed Hong Qigong's acupoint.

The two were taken by surprise and their vital acupoints sealed; half of their bodies numbed immediately. Startled they asked, "What are you doing?" Ouyang Feng grinned evilly, but did not say anything.

Hong Qigong sighed, "The Old Poison is very conceited; he is not willing to accept another's mercy. We have saved his life; if he does not kill his saviors, how can his heart be at



peace? Ay, I can only blame my own benevolent heart for rescuing these people in the middle of the night and forgetting this fact. Now I've endangered the lives of these two weary kids."

"You knew it very well," Ouyang Feng said, "Also the 'Nine Yin Manual' is in my hands; if I leave a copy in this boy named Guo's mind, I will only invite inevitable misfortune on myself."

Hearing him mentioning the 'Nine Yin Manual' Hong Qigong's heart was stirred; with a loud voice he recited, "Nu er qi liu, ha gua er, ning xie qi qia, ping dao er ..."

Ouyang Feng was startled; he recognized the sentence to be one among hundreds of difficult sentences he did not know the meaning of. Listening to Hong Qigong reciting it, he believed Hong Qigong understood the meaning and he thought, "There are many strange sentences in the manual, there must be a key to unlock their secrets. If I kill these three, I am afraid there is nobody else in this world who understands it and my taking possession of the manual will have been in vain." Therefore, he asked, "What does it mean?"

Hong Qigong replied, "Hun hua cha cha, xue gen xu bat u, mi er mi er ..." Even though he had listened to Guo Jing reciting the strange sentences from the manual, how could he have memorized everything? He was just talking nonsense, but his face showed deep veneration.

Ouyang Feng actually thought the sentences carried a very profound meaning; he focused his attention and thought deeply. Hong Qigong shouted, "Jing'er, now!"

Guo Jing pulled back his left hand and sent out his right palm while his left leg flew forward simultaneously. Actually when Ouyang Feng sent out his kick and launched a

surprise attack, his vital acupoint was grabbed and he was unable to move. When Hong Qigong talked nonsense and confused Ouyang Feng, it caused him to lose his concentration and slightly loosen his grip. Guo Jing took this opportunity to free himself and launch a counterattack. Guo Jing had trained the 'Changing Muscle Forging Bones' to the second stage; although he did not learn any new fist or kick techniques, his original strength was actually increased by at least twenty percent. This one pull, one palm and one kick were executed without any extraordinary moves, but the force within his attack was unexpectedly strong.

Ouyang Feng was taken by surprise and because the raft was narrow, there was no space to withdraw; he was forced to raise his hand to fend off the attack, but his grip on Huang Rong did not loosen.

Guo Jing's fist and palms went out one after another, attacking his enemy like a violent storm. He was well aware that, on this narrow raft, should he ever let Ouyang Feng attack with his Toad Stance, then the three of them would be dead with no burial ground. This flurry of attacks forced Ouyang Feng to withdraw half a step.

Huang Rong leaned sideways slightly, positioning her shoulder to bump Ouyang Feng's body. Ouyang Feng was amused and thought, "This little girl wants to bump me, just how much skill does she think she has? Don't blame me if I bump you clear to the ocean." He had just finished this thought when Huang Rong's shoulder arrived. Ouyang Feng did not evade nor try to parry, appearing not to pay attention; then he suddenly felt a pricking pain on his chest. The pain caused him to realize immediately that she was wearing Peach Blossom Island's treasure, the 'Soft Hedgehog Armor' [ruan wei jia]. By now he was already at the edge of the raft, so he could not move back even half a

step. Her armor was full of sharp spines which he could not deal with. He hastily let go of her vital acupoint and flung her to one side.

Huang Rong did not have any room to set foot on and she was going to fall into the water. Guo Jing reached behind his back and grabbed her, while his left hand was still attacking his enemy. Huang Rong drew out her dagger and rushed forward to attack.

Ouyang Feng stood on the edge of the raft with water splashing his legs; no matter how hard Guo Jing and Huang Rong attacked, they were not able to force him into the water.

Hong Qigong and Ouyang Ke were unable to move, so both of them helplessly watched the ferocious fight. Their hearts were thumping madly as they watched this evenly matched fight where the margin between life and death was as narrow as a strand of hair. They both bitterly wished they could help their side.

Ouyang Feng's martial arts were considerably above Guo Jing and Huang Rong's combined power, but because he had been immersed in the water for several days, almost half of his strength was gone. Although Huang Rong's martial arts were not too high, she was wearing the 'Soft Hedgehog Armor' and her hand was holding a sharp dagger. These offensive and defensive weapons were enough to give Ouyang Feng some headaches. Not only that, Guo Jing's 'Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms', his seventy-two stances of the 'Vacant Fist', the 'Mutual Hands Combat' technique, as well as the recently learned 'Changing Muscles Forging Bones' from the 'Nine Yin Manual' combined to make him a formidable opponent. Besides that, the three were engaged in a close fight on a raft!

After a while Ouyang Feng's palms started getting stronger; Guo Jing and Huang Rong started to fall under his attack. Hong Qigong was very anxious watching this fierce battle. Amidst Ouyang Feng's dancing palm shadows his left leg kicked out with a strong gust of wind. Huang Rong did not dare to block it and was forced to somersault back and fell into the water.

Suddenly facing a strong enemy alone, Guo Jing was feeling the strain. Luckily, after falling into the water on the left side of the raft, Huang Rong swam under the bottom of the raft, boarded on the right side, and swept her dagger towards Ouyang Feng's chest. Now Ouyang Feng had to face enemies on two sides.

While fighting courageously, Huang Rong thought of plans to overcome this situation, "If this fight continues, and with our inferior martial arts, in the end we will fall under his hands. The only way to defeat him is under water." As soon as this thought entered her mind, she swept her dagger and cut the sail rope and the sail immediately fell down; the raft now carried by the waves and no longer moved forward. Huang Rong drew back two steps, wrapped the rope several times around Hong Qigong's body, then several turns on logs from the raft and made two tight knots.

With Huang Rong out of the battle, Guo Jing would not be able to withstand the enemy much longer. He managed to block three successive stances, but the fourth stance forced him to step backwards. Ouyang Feng did not want to let him go and his palms continuously attacked. Guo Jing was forced to step backwards again and using the 'Fish Jumping out of the Deep' [yu yue yu yuan] he managed to block another stance. For the next stance he was forced to move backwards again and his left foot stepped on empty air. In this critical moment he did not get nervous; his right foot

immediately flew forward to block his enemy from attacking further. With no feet on the raft, with a 'splash!' he also fell into the water.

The raft was rocking hard and Huang Rong also took this opportunity to leap into the sea. The two pushed and pulled the raft, trying to overturn it. They knew Ouyang Ke would drown, and besides, in the water Ouyang Feng was not their match. Hong Qigong's was tied to the raft and the two took the risk of dealing with the Western Poison first before trying to save their master.

Ouyang Feng understood their intentions very well and he raised his foot over Hong Qigong's head and loudly shouted, "You two kids listen to me! If you rock the raft one more time, I will kick instantly!"

Huang Rong understood her first plan had been foiled so she proceeded with her second plan: she took a deep breath, dove underneath the raft and began cutting ropes with her dagger. She knew they were not too far from land; after drowning Ouyang Feng and his nephew, she thought they could ride on logs and get to shore without too much trouble.

'Snap...snap!' the wooden raft broke into two halves. Ouyang Ke was on the left half, while Ouyang Feng and Hong Qigong were on the right half. Inwardly Ouyang Feng felt anxious and he quickly stretched his hand to grab his nephew; then he bent over looking into the water, ready to strike Huang Rong if she cut another rope.

From under the water Huang Rong could see Ouyang Feng's shadow clearly. Knowing his next attack would be very fierce, she did not dare to cut another rope. Both sides were in deadlock for a long time. Huang Rong swam several

zhang away, took another deep breath, then dove right back under, waiting for an opportunity to launch her attack.

With concentrated attention, both sides waited for an opportunity. For the moment their part of the sea became very calm and the sun shone brightly over their heads. The ocean seemed so peaceful, but on this half raft, with one above and one below, there were very murderous intentions.

Huang Rong thought, "If this half raft is cut in two, the waves will certainly turn it over." While Ouyang Feng thought, "As soon as she pokes her head up, I am going to slap the water. The vibration should be enough to scatter her brains. Once this little girl is gone, the little thief named Guo should not prove a problem to me." Two people waited without blinking, both itching to strike.

Suddenly Ouyang Ke pointed to the left and called out, "A boat...a boat!"

Hong Qigong and Guo Jing turned their heads and saw a big boat with a dragon figurehead and its sail fully raised; it approached riding the wind and breaking waves. A moment later Ouyang Ke saw someone standing on the bow; he was large in stature and was wearing a scarlet kasaya [a garment worn by Buddhist monks] and looked like the Monk Lingzi. As the boat got closer, he could see more clearly, it was indeed the Monk Lingzi. He quickly told his uncle.

Ouyang Feng concentrates his 'qi' in his 'dan tian' [lower abdomen] and loudly called out, "Friends, here, come quickly!"

Under water, Huang Rong did not know what was happening, but Guo Jing knew they were in more trouble. He swam underwater and pulled Huang Rong's arm,

signaling her that more enemies were coming. Huang Rong was not very clear on his intentions, but she was aware something was not right. She signaled back to Guo Jing to block Ouyang Feng's palm while she severed the rope.

Guo Jing knew his own skill was inferior to his enemy by a long shot; but now that he was underwater and the enemy above, the difference was lessened. He knew blocking Ouyang Feng's palm meant endangering his own life, but it was a critical time and he had no other alternative. Therefore he exerted all his strength into his palms and suddenly swept upwards.

"Ugh!" Ouyang Feng grunted as his palms struck the water; meanwhile Guo Jing's palms were coming up from below. Two forces collided on the surface of the sea, creating a big splash. The raft was lifted several feet upwards and, 'snap... snap', the half raft broke into two parts; it seemed Huang Rong managed to cut the rope just in time.

In the meantime the big boat was only a few dozen zhangs away from the raft. After cutting the rope, Huang Rong immediately dove deeper underwater. She was about to come up and stab Ouyang Feng when she noticed Guo Jing was motionless and slowly sinking. She was alarmed, quickly swam near, and grabbed his arm. She swam several zhangs away before coming up to the surface. Guo Jing's eyes were tightly shut, his face blue and his lips colorless; he was unconscious.

The large boat lowered a small boat with several sailors pulling the oars; they took Ouyang Feng, his nephew, as well as Hong Qigong aboard. Huang Rong called three times, "Jing ge ge!" but Guo Jing did not wake. She thought that although the boat was full of the enemies, she had no alternative; she held on to Guo Jing's head and swam towards the small boat.

The sailors pulled Guo Jing aboard and held out their hands to pull her in. Huang Rong's left hand pressed on the boat's edge and she leaped up from the water like a flying fish, into the boat, scaring the sailors.

When his palms collided with Ouyang Feng's, Guo Jing felt a tremendous force surging through his body and he passed out immediately. He awakened and knew he was leaning on Huang Rong's chest and aware that they were on a small boat. He concentrated his breathing and found out that he was not internally injured; he raised his eyebrows and smiled at Huang Rong.

Huang Rong smiled back at him and her anxiety and fears were gone in an instant. She at last had an opportunity to see what kind of boat was coming to rescue them. Once she looked up, she groaned inwardly; she saw, standing at the bow of the big boat, seven or eight men, both tall and short. They were the same Wulin characters she'd met several months earlier at the Zhao Palace in Yanjing. The short, stout one with bright eyes was the 'Butcher with a Thousand Hands' [qian shou ren tu] Peng Lianhu, the one with a bald, shiny head was the 'Dragon King of Guimen' [gui men long wang] (lit. Ghost Gate) Note to final editor: the earlier chapter has 'Dragon King of Demonic Group'] Sha Tongtian, the one with three carbuncles on his head sticking out like horns was the 'Three-Headed Dragon' [san tou jiao] Hou Tonghai, the one with ruddy face and white hair was the 'Ginseng Immortal' [shen xian lao guai] Liang Ziweng, the one wearing scarlet kasaya was the Tibetan monk the 'Big Handprint' [da shou yin] Venerable Lingzhi. There were several others that she did not know. She thought, "Jing ge ge's martial arts and mine have recently enjoyed tremendous improvements. If we have to fight with Peng Lianhu and the others one-on-one, I might not win, but Jing ge ge will definitely score a victory. But the Old



Poison is standing nearby, plus these other people. It will be very difficult for us to escape danger today.”

The people on the big boat were surprised to hear Ouyang Feng’s shouts from the raft. Now that they saw Guo Jing and the others, they were even more surprised. Ouyang Feng was holding his nephew; Guo Jing and Huang Rong carried Hong Qigong; the five people in two groups jumped up one after another from the small boat to the big boat.

Soon a man came out of the cabin to welcome them; he wore an embroidered colored robe. As soon as he saw Guo Jing, both men were stunned. The man wore a neat beard on his chin, had a handsome face; it was none other than the Sixth Prince of the Great Jin, Wanyan Honglie.

After escaping from the Liu family ancestral hall in Baoying, Wanyan Honglie was afraid that Guo Jing might pursue him to the north; he did not dare go home. He came across Peng Lianhu, Sha Tongtian and the others and decided to head down south to steal the book left behind by Yue Wumu (the Wumu Legacy). By this time the Mongolian army had dispatched a large scale military expedition against the Jin; the capital, Yanjing, had been besieged for several months and the sixteen prefectures surrounding it had fallen to the Mongolian invasion. As the days passed the situation for the Jin got more and more critical. Wanyan Honglie was very worried about the fate of his country; he’d seen with his own eyes that the Mongolians were very swift and fierce. Although the Jin army was ten times superior in numbers, each time they met, the Jin were routed. Wanyan Honglie painstakingly pondered all ideas to rebuild his country’s lofty aspirations, and came to the conclusion that what he needed right at that time was the Wumu Legacy. He thought that if this book on military strategy was in his possession, he would be able to build a divine and invincible army just like Yue Fei’s own army. Even though the

Mongolian army was strong, they would flee at the sight of his army.

He presently led this expedition south, trying to track down the whereabouts of the Legacy; but he feared the Southern Song would uncover his intentions and be on guard against intruders. He decided to go by sea, hoping nobody would know his itinerary and he could land on the Zhejiang coast undetected and quietly enter Lin'an to steal the book.

Before departing he looked for Ouyang Ke knowing he was a martial arts expert and would be a highly useful companion. After a long time of not hearing any news of him, he decided to leave without waiting for this man. Now they suddenly meet quite by accident on the sea; not only Ouyang Ke, but Guo Jing as well. He could not help but feel anxious; he was afraid his secret mission had been compromised.

Seeing the enemy who'd killed his father, Guo Jing seethed with anger; he did not care if he was surrounded by powerful enemies and he looked at Wanyan Honglie with blazing gaze.

Just then someone else came out of the cabin, but when only half step through the door he immediately drew back in. Huang Rong's sharp eyes saw that the man looked like Yang Kang.

In the meantime Ouyang Ke introduced his uncle to the prince, "Uncle, this is the Sixth Prince of the Great Jin who loves people with high skills." Ouyang Feng cupped his fists in front of his chest.

Wanyan Honglie did not know that Ouyang Feng was a very big name in the martial arts realm. He noticed Ouyang Feng had an arrogant expression, but for Ouyang Ke's sake he returned the cupped fists gesture.

When Peng Lianhu, Sha Tongtian and the others heard his name, they bowed and spoke their praise, "For a long time Mr. Ouyang has been the Mount Tai and the Big Dipper [meaning 'ultimate'] of the Wulin world; today we are fortunate to finally meet you." Ouyang Feng slightly bowed, returning their respect half-heartedly.

'Big Handprint' the Venerable Lingzhi came from Tibet and did not know of the Western Poison's reputation; he merely put his palms together without saying anything.

Wanyan Honglie knew that Sha Tongtian and the others were conceited men and they always looked down on others; but he noticed they were very respectful towards Ouyang Feng, almost to the point of fear and heaped flattering words on him. Their expressions looked very unusual. Wanyan Honglie realized that this water-swollen man with disheveled hair and bare feet was not an ordinary person; he immediately treated Ouyang Feng with respect and uttered some polite words.

Among these people, only Liang Ziwen had different feelings. Because Guo Jing had drunk the precious blood of his valuable viper, and now that they saw each other again, how could he not feel angry? But he also noticed that the person he was most afraid of, Hong Qigong, was with Guo Jing. Even though he was very angry, he managed to keep a smiling face. He went forward and bowed respectfully, "The little Liang Ziwen greets Clan Leader Hong and wishes Senior well."

His speech startled everyone. Although they all had heard for a long time of the stellar reputations of the Western Poison and the Northern Beggar, they had never met them in person. Who would have expected that two of the biggest names in the martial arts world would actually make their appearance at the same time? They were about to rush

forward and pay their respects when Hong Qigong laughed loudly and said, "The Old Beggar is having very bad luck; a vicious dog has bitten me leaving me half dead and half alive, what are you paying respects for? It would be better if you bring me something to eat."

Everyone was startled and they thought, "This Hong Qigong is lying motionless because he is severely injured... we don't have anything to fear from him." They looked at Ouyang Feng, waiting to see what he was going to do.

Earlier, Ouyang Feng had cooked up a plan as to how to get rid of these three people: Hong Qigong must be eliminated first to avoid his own dishonorable behavior from becoming public; next, he would force Guo Jing to explain the difficult sentences from the manual and then he would kill him. As for Huang Rong, even though his nephew loved her, if he let her live, she would cause an enormous disaster in the future. However, if he personally killed her, Huang Yaoshi would not let him have a single moment's peace. Therefore he decided to use someone else's hand to kill her and thus shift the blame from his shoulders. Since the three were aboard the boat, he was not afraid they would fly away and escape. He stepped forward and said to Wanyan Honglie, "These three people are very crafty and they are also highly skilled in martial arts. I beseech the Prince to assign some people to guard them well."

Liang Ziweng was very pleased; he leaned to the left and squeezed past Sha Tongtian to grab Guo Jing's hand. Guo Jing turned his wrist over and slapped Liang Ziweng's shoulder. He'd used the 'Sighting the Dragon in the Field', a swift and heavy stance; even though Liang Ziweng's martial arts skill was high, he was unexpectedly forced to stagger back two steps.

Peng Lianhu and Liang Ziweng continually competed to win the favor of Wanyan Honglie. They always tried to outdo the other and what their faces showed was different from what they felt in their hearts. Seeing Liang Ziweng stumble, Peng Lianhu was inwardly very pleased. He stepped closer to Hong Qigong and the others; but he was waiting for Liang Ziweng to fall before taking any action.

When Liang Ziweng slipped past Sha Tongtian to pull Guo Jing away, he was prepared for Guo Jing's single stance, the 'Proud Dragon Shows Remorse'; he knew he would not be able to face it head on, hence the attack from the side. Who would have thought that in less than a month the 'Proud Dragon Shows Remorse' was not the only move Guo Jing knew? Because Guo Jing did not pursue, he jumped up and attacked with his fists, launching his life's worth of training in martial arts, the 'Wild Fox from Liaodong Fist' technique [liao dong ye hu quan fa], determined to take Guo Jing's life, both for embarrassing him just now and also for killing his precious snake.

One time Liang Ziweng went to gather ginseng on Mount Changbai [located in Jilin province]; he saw a hound fighting with a wild fox in the snow. The fox was very cunning; it leaped to the east and hopped to the west, very quick and agile. Although the hound's claws and teeth were sharp, after battling for a long time it had yet not scored victory. Liang Ziweng noticed the ability of the fox to jump very high and he had a sudden inspiration. He abandoned his intention to gather ginseng and decided to stay in a thatched hut on the snowy mountain, painstakingly pondering martial arts moves for several months. As a result, the 'Wild Fox Fist technique' was born.

The technique incorporates four fundamental principles, namely 'ling' [alert/quick], 'shan' [dodge], 'pu' [pounce], and 'die' [tumble]. This technique had come in handy in

dealing with powerful enemies. First of all, he did not give the enemy an opportunity to catch him since he was very quick to retreat and he was able to hasten to the left and escape to the right; then he struck back as the opportunity arose.

Now he did not dare to underestimate his opponent any longer and launched this fist technique right away. His attacks were lightning fast as he threw everything he had at Guo Jing. The fist technique was weird; Guo Jing had never seen anything like it before. He thought, "In Rong'er's 'Peach Blossom Island Divine Sword Palm' technique there are many trick moves; out of five attacks only one is real, or sometimes one out of eight. But it seems this old man's fists are all empty strikes. I wonder what kind of strange technique this is?" However, he remembered Hong Qigong's advice, that regardless the technique his opponent is using all he needed to do was to keep using the 'Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms'.

After watching the two men fighting for a while, everybody began to silently shake their heads, thinking, "The Old Freak Liang can be considered a grand master of martial arts; why is it that when fighting this new born kid [very inexperienced] he keeps moving around and does not dare to attack head on?"

Several moves later Guo Jing's palm strength began to force him back step by step; it seemed that very soon he would fall into the ocean. Realizing his 'Wild Fox Fist' would not help him score a victory, Liang Ziweng thought of using a different set of fist techniques; but it was too late. Guo Jing's palms enveloped him completely, not giving him any chance to counterattack. Amidst the strong gusts of wind Hong Qigong's voice was heard, "Attack the lower part!"

Guo Jing immediately launched the stance 'The Divine Dragon Swings Its Tail' [shen long bai wei] and his left arm swept him away. Liang Ziweng called out in alarm and tumbled over the rail of the boat.

Everybody was stunned and rushed to the edge to look, only to hear somebody on the sea laughing a long laugh. Liang Ziweng's body suddenly flew back up and with a loud grunt landed back on deck, unconscious.

What had just happened confounded everyone on board. Could it be that the waves bounced his body back up? Everybody crowded to the rail of the boat, looked down to the sea below and saw an old man with a white beard and white hair rushing to the east and dashing to the west on the surface of the sea at unusual speed. They strained their eyes to see more clearly; as it turned out, that man was riding on the back of a huge shark at a speed not inferior to someone galloping on horseback on dry land.

Guo Jing was delightedly surprised and with a loud voice he shouted, "Big Brother Zhou, I am here!" That shark rider was indeed the Old Urchin Zhou Botong.

Zhou Botong heard Guo Jing's shout and he cheered with delight; then he hit the shark's head near its right eye with his fist and the shark turned left immediately, coming near the boat's side.

"Is that Brother Guo?" Zhou Botong called out, "How are you? There is a whale ahead and I have been chasing it for a whole day and night. I want to continue chasing it. See you later!"

"Big Brother! Come here quickly!" Guo Jing anxiously called, "There are many bad people here who want to bully your little brother!"

Zhou Botong was angry, "Is that so?" His right hand held onto something inside of the shark's mouth, while his left hand grabbed onto the rail of the big boat. He pulled hard and both man and shark suddenly flew up above everybody's heads and landed on the deck. He roared, "Who dares to bully my little brother?"

Almost every single one of the people aboard had extensive knowledge of Jianghu matters; but this white bearded old man who suddenly appeared in a most bizarre way stupefied everyone. Even Hong Qigong and Ouyang Feng were dumbstruck.

Zhou Botong saw Huang Rong and he felt strange. "How come you are also here?" he asked.

Huang Rong smiled, "Why not?" she replied, "I figured you'd come back today, that's why I am here waiting for you. Quickly teach me how to ride a shark."

Zhou Botong laughed, "Very well, I'll teach you."

Huang Rong replied, "First you have to help us get rid of these bad people, and then you can teach me."

Zhou Botong swept his gaze across the people on the deck and he said to Ouyang Feng, "I knew other people wouldn't dare to act so savagely, so it turns out to be you."

Ouyang Feng replied coldly, "A man who does not keep his word, while he is alive in this world, will be the laughing stock of all the warriors of the world."

"Totally correct," Zhou Botong said, "A man of integrity certainly won't cause trouble. But those who speak truly and those who fart [lies] has to be distinguished clearly, otherwise people who hear it might not know if the sound comes from above or from below. I am indeed looking for



you to settle an old score and nothing could better than seeing you here. Old Beggar, you are our witness; stand up and give us your judgment.”

Hong Qigong lay on deck and he smiled slightly. Huang Rong said, “The Old Poison was almost dead nine times and my Master was kind enough to rescue him every single time. Who would have thought that he has the heart of a wolf and the lungs of a dog and repays kindness with evil; he injured my Master and sealed his acupoints.”

Actually, Hong Qigong only saved Ouyang Feng’s life three times, but Huang Rong intentionally exaggerated by a factor of three. Ouyang Feng knew this but did not want to argue; he only looked at her with blazing eyes.

Zhou Botong stooped down trying to unseal Hong Qigong’s ‘Song Reservoir’ [qu xhi] and ‘Bubbling Spring’ [yong quan] acupoints by rubbing them. “Old Urchin, it’s useless,” Hong Qigong said.

It turned out that the acupoint sealing method Ouyang Feng used was somewhat unusual; other than Huang Yaoshi and himself, there was no one else in this whole wide world who could unseal them. Ouyang Feng was very smug, “Old Urchin, unseal his acupoints if you have the ability,” he challenged.

Even though Huang Rong could not unseal them, she was familiar with the sealing method; she pressed her lips together and said, “What’s so strange about that? My father can unseal this ‘Penetrating Bone’ [tou gu da xue fa] acupoint sealing technique without very much effort.”

Hearing her mentioning the correct name for his acupoint sealing technique, Ouyang Feng was amazed that this little girl’s knowledge was as deep as a bottomless abyss, even encompassing acupoint sealing techniques. However, he did

not pay any attention to her; turning to Zhou Botong he asked, "You lost our bet; why are you talking like breaking smelly wind?"

Zhou Botong covered up his nose and called out, "Break wind? Bad smell, bad smell! But let me ask you this: what did we bet on?"

"Everyone here, except this Guo kid and this little girl, is a well-known warrior. I'll tell what happened and ask these gentlemen to be our judges," Ouyang Feng replied.

"Well said, well said," Peng Lianhu said, "Mr. Ouyang, please tell us."

"This gentleman is the Quanzhen Sect's Zhou Botong, Master Zhou, known in the Jianghu world as the Old Urchin. In terms of seniority, he holds a very high position; Qiu Chuji, Wang Chuyi and the other Quanzhen Seven Masters are his martial nephews."

For the past dozen years or so, Zhou Botong had been detained on Peach Blossom Island; before that time his martial arts skills were obscure. Aside from some mischievous troubles, he never accomplished anything worth mentioning, so his reputation did not spread far and wide in the Jianghu world. However, everybody had seen him riding a shark, a feat not easily accomplished by any of them. Since he is the martial uncle of the Quanzhen Seven Masters, it's no wonder he is this good. As a result everybody talked amongst themselves in low voices. Peng Lianhu remembered their appointment on the eighth month's mid-autumn festival in Jiaying; if the Quanzhen Seven Masters had this strange man as their ally, they would not be easy to deal with. He could not help but feel anxious.

Ouyang Feng continued, "Brother Zhou was stranded in the sea amongst a mass of sharks and I rescued him. I said this mass of sharks was nothing much and without too much effort I could kill every single one of them. Brother Zhou did not believe me, so the two of us made a bet. Brother Zhou, isn't what I said true?"

Zhou Botong nodded his head repeatedly, "It was absolutely true. But you need to explain to everyone what we were betting on exactly," he said.

"Correct!" Ouyang Feng said, "I said that if I lost, I would do whatever you wanted me to do. If I am not willing to do it, then I must jump into the sea and become fish food. You said the same thing, is that correct?"

Zhou Botong nodded his head again, "Right, right, that was absolutely correct, and then what happened?" he asked.

"What do you mean 'what happened'? You lost!" Ouyang Feng said.

This time Zhou Botong shook his head repeatedly, "Not true, not true!" he said, "It was you who lost, not me."

Ouyang Feng was angry, "A real man can distinguish between right and wrong; how can you deny your own words? If I lost, how come you were willing to plunge into the sea to kill yourself?"

Zhou Botong sighed, "That's true. I originally said that the Old Urchin's fortune was bad so I lost to you; who would have thought that as I went into the water the Heavens sent something we could regard as a coincidence. Only then did I know that the Old Poison had lost and the Old Urchin had really won."

Ouyang Feng, Hong Qigong and Huang Rong asked together, "What coincidence?"

Zhou Botong stooped down with his left hand, grabbed a piece of stick stuck inside the shark's mouth, lifted the shark and said, "I met my riding animal. Old Poison, take a look; it was your precious nephew who stuck this stick inside its mouth, wasn't it?"

It was indeed Ouyang Ke who concocted this wicked plan to insert a stick inside the shark's mouth, so that it would not be able to eat and eventually die of starvation. Ouyang Feng had seen this with his own eyes. He saw a huge shark with a wooden stick in its mouth and he also saw the wound caused by the hook in the shark's mouth. Without any doubt this was the very same shark they'd returned to the sea that day. "So what?" he said.

Zhou Botong clapped his hands and laughed, "That means you lost! Our bet was that you would kill every single one of the sharks, but this good fellow was bestowed with good fortune by your nephew. It could not eat the dead sharks, hence could not eat the poison. It was the only shark left alive. How can you say that the Old Urchin didn't win?" He burst out laughing. Ouyang Feng's countenance changed and he could not say anything.

Guo Jing delightedly asked, "Big Brother, where were you these past few days? I was so miserable thinking about you."

Zhou Botong laughed, "I was playing and having fun. Not long after I jumped into the sea, I saw this fellow gasping for breath on the surface and it seemed to be in agony. I said, 'Old Shark, oh Old Shark, seems like today you and I share the same fate!' Then I suddenly jumped on the shark's back. It furiously went under the water and I had to

hold my breath with both hands holding tightly to its neck and my feet periodically kicked its belly. In great difficulty it went back up to the surface. Without giving me a chance to take two mouthfuls of air this fellow dove back under. The two of us fought for half a day and he finally became obedient and was willing to listen to what I said. I wanted it go to the east and it went to the east, I wanted it to head north and he wouldn't dare think of going south." As he spoke he gently patted the shark's head, looking extremely pleased.

Of those who were present, only Huang Rong admired and envied him. Her eyes shone and she asked, "I played in the sea for many years, why didn't I think of this trick? I was so stupid!"

"Look at its mouth full of teeth; they are as sharp as knives," Zhou Botong said, "If there was no stick in its mouth, would you dare to ride it?"

"You spent the last few days riding on the back of this fish?" Huang Rong asked.

"Certainly," Zhou Botong replied, "The two of us have pretty good skills at catching fish. As soon as we saw a fish, we chased it and I sent a fist or a palm to kill it. Out of ten fish, I only ate one and this fellow ate the other nine."

Huang Rong felt the shark's belly and asked, "You dumped dead fish into its belly? It did not need its teeth to eat?"

"He's a good eater," Zhou Botong answered, "There was a time the two of us chased an extremely big cuttlefish ..."

Two people, one old, the other young, were having an animated discussion, totally ignoring everybody else on board the ship. Ouyang Feng groaned inwardly and silently thought of some methods to deal with this situation. Zhou

Botong suddenly turned to him and said, "Hey, Old Poison, do you admit defeat?"

Ouyang Feng had been the one making the speech earlier; how could he swallow his own words in front of this many people? He was obliged to say, "So what if I lost? Do you think there is anything I can't do?"

"Hmm," Zhou Botong said, "I must think of a difficult thing for you to do. Very well, you scolded me just now saying that I was farting; I want you to fart immediately and let everybody smell it."

Hearing Zhou Botong ask Ouyang Feng to break wind for no reason at all, Huang Rong was annoyed. Breaking wind at will was naturally not easy for the average person, but with strong internal energy, it was not difficult to circulate the breathing to all parts of the body, hence it was an extremely trivial thing to do. She was afraid of Ouyang Feng's craftiness, of his venomous snake staff and was afraid he would grab this opportunity to gently break wind and put everything behind him without too much trouble. So she hastily said, "Not good, not good! First you want to tell him to unseal my Master's acupoints, then we can talk some more."

"See!" Zhou Botong said, "Even a young miss is afraid of your smelly fart. Alright, I'll let you go this time. I was not going to ask you to do a difficult thing anyway; quickly tend to the Old Beggar's injury. The Old Beggar's skill is not less than yours; if not of your sneakiness, there's no way you would be able to injure him. After he is healed, the two of you can fight again. At that time let the Old Urchin be the judge."

Ouyang Feng knew Hong Qigong's injury was incurable, so he was not afraid of future retaliation. But he was afraid

that Zhou Botong would come up with a more difficult and strange request. Under the scrutiny of numerous people he felt really awkward; he did not want to comply, yet he was too proud not to. Without saying anything he bent down, exerted strength to his palm and unsealed Hong Qigong's acupoints. Huang Rong and Guo Jing rushed forward to help their master stand.

Zhou Botong swept his gaze to the other people on the deck, he said, "The Old Urchin is most afraid to smell the urine scent of the sheep eaten by you barbarians. Quickly let down a small boat and send us four people ashore."

Ever since he'd seen the fight between Zhou Botong and Huang Yaoshi, Ouyang Feng knew that this man's martial arts were very strange. If for any reason they had to fight, he was certain he would not be defeated, but scoring a victory was not guaranteed either. He decided to endure things patiently for the time being. He wanted to wait until he had mastered the 'Nine Yin Manual', then he would come and settle the account with Zhou Botong. Besides, he had the excuse of losing the bet earlier. When all was said and done, it would be better off to send this annoying plague away, so he made up his mind and said, "Very well, your luck was very good! Since you won the bet, let it be as you said." Turning his head to Wanyan Honglie he said, "Prince, please let down a boat to take these four people ashore."

Wanyan Honglie hesitated as he thought, "I am afraid that as soon as they are ashore, these four will leak my secret mission to the south."

All this time the Venerable Lingzhi was watching with his cold eyes. Earlier he had seen Ouyang Feng's unkempt appearance and his heart was filled with contempt. He thought that this 'chicken half-drowned in soup' did not

dare to defy even half a word of whatever Zhou Botong told him to do; it seemed likely he enjoyed an unearned reputation. Even if his martial arts were excellent, he would not necessarily be more skillful than the rest of the people on board. Noticing Wanyan Honglie's slight hesitation, he moved forward two steps and said, "If we were on the raft we would have to comply with Mr. Ouyang wishes; how could other people dare to speak too much? But we are on this boat and we have to listen to the Prince's instructions."

Listening to this, everyone's heart was stirred and they turned their gaze on Ouyang Feng to see what he was going to do. Ouyang Feng coldly looked the Venerable Lingzhi up and down, sizing him up. He raised his face to the sky and wryly said, "Does this Great Monk deliberately want to make things difficult for this old man?"

Venerable Lingzhi replied, "I don't dare. The lowly monk has lived at the edge of Tibet, friendless and ignorant. Today is the very first time I heard Mr. Ouyang's honorable name. I don't need to have anything to do with you whatsoever ..."

Before he could finish, Ouyang Feng had moved forward one step; his left hand swiftly made a false move while his right hand deftly grabbed Venerable Lingzhi. With a little effort he turned the monk over and held him upside down. It had happened so fast that all the others saw was Venerable Lingzhi's red kasaya sway, and then flutter loosely in midair. Nobody saw clearly what technique Ouyang Feng used.

Venerable Lingzhi was a head taller than anyone else, but Ouyang Feng was able to grab his neck easily. Even if Ouyang Feng lifted his arm up over his head, he would not necessarily be able to lift Lingzhi's feet off the deck; but



when Ouyang Feng turned his body upside down, the top of Lingzhi's head was actually about four feet above the deck.

Venerable Lingzhi's legs were kicking wildly in the air and his mouth let out roaring curses. Everybody had seen Venerable Lingzhi fight Wang Chuyi at the Zhao Palace; they knew his skill was not a trivial matter. But how could he have been turned upside down by Ouyang Feng and held there with his arms flailing weakly beside his head as though the arms were broken and he did not have the strength to struggle free?

With his eyes still looking upward, Ouyang Feng said dryly, "Today was the first time you heard my name; therefore, you look down on the old man, don't you?"

Venerable Lingzhi was both frightened and angry. He tried to exert his internal energy several times, trying to struggle free, but no matter what he did, he was not able to escape. Peng Lianhu and the others had seen what happened and their faces showed amazement.

Ouyang Feng continued, "You look down on the old man, that's alright. But I don't want to stoop to your low level in front of the Honorable Prince. So you want to detain the Old Urchin, Master Zhou and the Nine-fingered Divine Beggar, Master Hong. Heh, heh ... do you think you can rely on your magical skills to match them? You are both friendless and unlearned; it's no wonder you don't know much and have not had enough lessons to teach you manners. Old Urchin, take this!"

Again, nobody saw Ouyang Feng's hand move; he merely exerted his strength to his palm and Venerable Lingzhi flew like a cloud from the port to the starboard side of the deck. As soon as he felt Ouyang Feng's palm strength leave his body and he was free, Lingzhi stretched his body like a carp

trying to turn his body right side up. Then he suddenly felt a sharp pain on his neck; he cried out and stretched out his left arm to attack. Again he felt his arm go numb and hang helplessly beside his head. Once again his body was suspended midair. As it turned out, Zhou Botong followed Ouyang Feng's example and grabbed him by the neck.

Although Wanyan Honglie understood Lingzhi's precarious situation, he knew nobody could accuse Ouyang Feng of not giving forewarning. None amongst his warriors had the ability to deal with Zhou Botong, just this one man; hence he hastily said, "Mister Zhou, you don't have to play any longer, Little Prince will send a boat out to take the four of you ashore."

"Very good," Zhou Botong said, "You can also try to take this!" Following Ouyang Feng's example, he exerted his strength to his palm and sent the Venerable Lingzhi flying towards the Prince.

Of course Wanyan Honglie knew martial arts, but his skill was limited to the saber, spear and bow and arrow from horseback. The flying monk from Zhou Botong's hand carried a swift and strong force; how could he take it? Even if he didn't die he would certainly suffer a heavy injury; so he hastily stepped aside to avoid him.

Sha Tongtian knew the Prince was in danger and straight away stepped forward in front of the Prince, trying to protect him. He saw the Venerable Lingzhi coming fast and if he struck with his palm, he might injure the monk. Following Ouyang Feng and Zhou Botong's earlier example, he wanted to grab the monk's neck, turn him right side up, and then lay him down gently. However, he had forgotten one important detail; namely, his martial arts were way below that of those two people. He had seen Ouyang Feng and Zhou Botong, seemingly without effort, grabbing and

throwing Venerable Lingzhi's heavy body. Therefore he leaped up to intercept Lingzhi, stretching his hand to grab his neck. As he touched Venerable Lingzhi's neck he unexpectedly felt a burning sensation followed by a strong force attacking his hand and wrist. He knew if he did not ward off this attack his wrist would be broken immediately. At this critical moment he quickly withdrew his right hand, while his left fist launched his 'Splitting Armor Awl' [po jia zhui].

What had happened was when Venerable Lingzhi was thrown back and forth between Ouyang Feng and Zhou Botong, his blood was flowing adversely, his head was dizzy while his heart burned with anger. He heard Zhou Botong calling out for someone else to take his body; all he knew was that person must be an enemy, so while he was still airborne he had already exerted his strength in anger. As soon as Sha Tongtian's hand touched his neck, Venerable Lingzhi's 'Big Handprint' [da shou yin] slashed out.

In terms of strength these two were on par with each other; Sha Tongtian had the advantage of standing upright, but Venerable Lingzhi had prepared his attack beforehand, and thus caught him off guard. Two equal forces collided; Sha Tongtian was pushed back three steps, but Venerable Lingzhi, also shaken by the collision, fell flat on the deck. He immediately stood up and saw that the person he thought attacked him was Sha Tongtian; he thought, "Even you, a stinky thief, want to take advantage of me!" With a loud roar he pounced forward.

Peng Lianhu knew he misunderstood the situation and hastily stepped in between the two people, calling out, "Reverend, please don't get angry, Brother Sha only had good intentions."

In the meantime the small boat had been lowered. Zhou Botong grabbed the stick inside the shark's mouth; he lifted and hurled the huge shark into the sea while simultaneously exerting his strength and breaking the stick into two parts. As it splashed into the sea, the shark felt the stick in its mouth had been broken and was very happy. It dove deep into the water to hunt for some fish.

Huang Rong smiled, "Jing ge ge, later on the two of us and Big Brother Zhou can ride sharks together and we can have a race." Guo Jing did not answer but Zhou Botong clapped his hands and cheered. He said, "We can ask the Old Beggar to be our judge."

After watching Zhou Botong and the others leave on the small boat, Wanyan Honglie started to think. With his kind of martial arts, Ouyang Feng would provide valuable assistance in his plan to steal the book. He took Venerable Lingzhi's hand and walked towards Ouyang Feng. "Everyone here are good friends and I hope Sir was not offended; I am sure Reverend was not serious. I wish both gentlemen to give Little Prince face and consider everything as a joke," he said.

Ouyang Feng smiled and extended his hand. Venerable Lingzhi, on the other hand, was still upset. He mused, "You only used the seizing technique [qin na] and caught me off guard. I have trained painstakingly for dozens of years to develop my 'Big Handprint' power; do you think I am inferior to you?" Then he also stretched out his hand while sending energy to his palm with the intention of gripping Ouyang Feng's palm hard. Just as he was about to exert his strength he suddenly jumped away. He felt as though he was touching red-hot steel and his hand was in so much pain that he dropped it in a hurry. Ouyang Feng did not want to pursue the matter so he faintly smiled. Venerable Lingzhi looked at his hand and did not see anything unusual

and thought, "Damn it, this old thief surely knows some demonical tricks."

Ouyang Feng noticed Liang Ziwen was still lying on the deck, unmoving. He came to examine him. Ouyang Feng knew that Liang Ziwen was pushed into the sea by Guo Jing and intercepted by Zhou Botong, who sealed his acupoints and threw him back onto the boat. He unsealed Liang Ziwen's acupoints and, there and then, Ouyang Feng became the leader of this group of warriors.

Wanyan Honglie immediately ordered a banquet to welcome Ouyang Feng and his nephew. While drinking wine Wanyan Honglie explained to Ouyang Feng his plan to go to Lin'an and steal the 'Wumu Legacy' while at the same time asking his willingness to help. Ouyang Feng actually had heard about this matter from his nephew but this time his heart was stirred. Suddenly a thought came into his mind, "What kind of man do you think I, Ouyang Feng, am? How can I submit to you? But I heard that not only was Yue Fei's military skill divine, his martial arts skill was also superb. I also heard that the Yue Family's martial arts had been lost to the martial art world. Perhaps in his legacy there is a martial arts manual as well as the military strategies. I will agree to help him get the book and if I like what I see... can't the Old Poison get what he wants?"

It was a case of: You cheat and I am crafty...it's everyone for himself. Wanyan Honglie wholeheartedly wanted the book to help him defeat the Great Song. It is said that while the praying mantis was hunting for the cicada, the yellow canary caught it from behind. Ouyang Feng had a different idea to top his. Therefore, while one man heaped flattering words, the other's mouth was full of compliance. In addition, Liang Ziwen did his utmost to be a good host and the banquet table was overflowing with wine. The guests and the hosts were having a good time. Only Ouyang Ke,

who was still in pain from his injury, did not drink anything, but only ate some dishes. Then he asked the crew to help him to the rear cabin to rest.

While they were eating and drinking in a lively manner, Ouyang Feng's countenance suddenly changed. The cup stopped at his mouth and he did not drink. Everyone was startled; nobody knew what had offended him. Wanyan Honglie was about to ask when Ouyang Feng said, "Listen!"

Everybody inclined their heads to listen, but other than the wind and the waves of the sea, they did not hear anything. A moment later Ouyang Feng asked again, "Do you hear it this time? It's a flute's sound." Everybody listened attentively with rapt attention and now they could hear, amidst the sound of the waves, the faint sound of a bamboo flute, sometimes broken, sometimes continuous. Nobody would have heard it if Ouyang Feng had not pointed it out.

Ouyang Feng walked to the bow; there he let out a long whistle and the sound traveled far. By now everybody else had arrived at the bow. They saw in the distance a light boat with three green sails, cutting the waves and coming fast towards their boat. They were inwardly astonished, "Is the flute sound coming from that boat? It's very far away...how could the sound travel here?"

Ouyang Feng ordered the sailors to turn the rudder to intercept that fast boat. Two boats gradually came closer to each other. On the bow of that fast boat stood a man wearing a long dark green robe and in his hand was indeed a flute. He called out loudly, "Brother Feng, have you seen my daughter?"

"Your daughter has a very strong temperament, how would I dare to provoke her?" Ouyang Feng replied.

Two boats were several zhang apart and nobody saw that man move his body and jump, yet they saw a blurred shadow and that man was already standing on the big boat's deck.

As Wanyan Honglie saw his marvelous skill and his desire to recruit warriors arose; he stepped forward to welcome the guest, saying, "What is your surname, Sir? I am very fortunate to receive your visit." Considering his lofty position as a prince of the Great Jin, he was being unusually modest. Upon seeing he was wearing a Jin official's costume, that man only gave him a blank stare, apparently not paying any attention to him.

Seeing the prince not getting the attention he deserved Ouyang Feng said, "Brother Yao, let me present to you the Sixth Prince of the Great Jin, Prince Zhao." To Wanyan Honglie he said, "This is the Master of Peach Blossom Island, the number one martial artist in the world; his knowledge is unparalleled."

Peng Lianhu and the others were so shocked that they involuntarily withdrew several steps. They knew from the start that Huang Rong's father was a very fierce devil and the Twin Killers of the Dark Winds were his renegade disciples and were able to shake Jianghu with their might. The faces of the people of the Wulin world would change color whenever their names were mentioned. If the disciples were that fierce, how much more so would be their master? He has appeared here to create trouble for sure, they thought, and everyone remembered that they had offended his daughter. Therefore, everyone's heart was filled with fear and nobody dared to make a sound.

When his daughter ran away, Huang Yaoshi knew she must be looking for Guo Jing. Initially he was angry and ignored her. But a few days later he became worried; he was afraid

she would find Guo Jing on the special ship he built and they'd go down to the bottom of the sea together. He was worried to death for his daughter, so he decided to go out to sea and search for her.

Knowing they were returning to the mainland, he decided to head to the west. But looking for a boat on a boundless sea was truly easier said than done. Even though Huang Yaoshi possessed extraordinary intelligence, after searching back and forth he did find any trace of her. On this particular day backed by his strong internal energy he played his flute at the bow of his boat, with the hope that his daughter would hear and respond. Unexpectedly it was Ouyang Feng who responded.

Huang Yaoshi, Peng Lianhu and the others did not know each other. Hearing Ouyang Feng say that this person was a prince of the Jin, he did not want to stay any longer; he cupped his fists across his chest and said to Ouyang Feng, "Brother needs to continue my search for my daughter; I apologize for not accompanying you longer." Then he turned around to leave.

Venerable Lingzhi had been angered by Ouyang Feng and Zhou Botong, and now another extremely arrogant and impolite person had come on board. He heard what Ouyang Feng had said, but he thought, "Could it be that there are so many highly skilled people in this world? Most likely these people know some witchcraft and deceive others with their demonical abilities. Let me try and perhaps I can deceive him as well." Seeing Huang Yaoshi was about to leave he said with a loud voice, "Are you looking for a fifteen or sixteen years old young lady?"

Huang Yaoshi paused and turned around with a happy expression on his face, "Yes Reverend, did you see her?"



Venerable Lingzhi coldly replied, "I did see a young lady, but the one I saw was a dead one, not a live one."

Huang Yaoshi's heart turned cold, "What?" he asked quickly, his voice was trembling.

Venerable Lingzhi replied, "About three days ago I saw the body of a young girl floating on the surface of the sea. She was wearing white clothes and a gold ring in her hair; originally her face must have been very pretty. Ay! What a pity, what a pity! What a pity her body was swollen by the seawater." He had accurately described Huang Rong's clothing and adornments.

Huang Yaoshi's mind was greatly troubled; his body shook and his face turned pale. A moment later he asked, "Are you telling me the truth?"

Everyone clearly saw Huang Rong board the small boat just minutes ago; now they heard Venerable Lingzhi deceiving this man and taking pleasure from another's misfortune. Even as they watched Huang Yaoshi's grieving face, nobody made a sound.

Venerable Lingzhi coldly continued, "Beside that young lady's body I saw three other corpses; one was of a young man with thick eyebrows and big eyes, the other one was an old beggar with a scarlet wine gourd on his back, and the last one was a white haired old man." He was describing Guo Jing, Hong Qigong and Zhou Botong.

Reaching this point Huang Yaoshi's doubts were completely gone. He squinted at Ouyang Feng, thinking, "You knew about my daughter so why didn't you tell me earlier?"

Ouyang Feng noticed his look and realized his grief had reached its peak so he began to have murderous intent. Although he himself would not suffer a loss, the oncoming

force would not be easy to resist. He quickly said, "Brother has just come on board this boat today and it is the first time I met these people. When this Reverend saw some floating corpses, your daughter was not necessarily amongst them." Sighing, he continued, "Your beloved daughter is such a good girl; it is very regrettable if she really died at such a young age. If my nephew found out, he would die of heartbreak." This speech shifted the blame from his shoulders, but clearly did not offend either side.

After listening to Ouyang Feng, Huang Yaoshi was in total shock; his heart sank in an instant. He was the type who loved to vent his anger on others; if it were otherwise, then when the Twin Killers of the Dark Winds stole his manual, why did he break Lu Chengfeng and his other innocent disciples' legs and expel them from his school? His chest felt icy-cold, but his blood was boiling, just like when his beloved wife died some years ago. His hands were trembling and his face changed from snow white to crimson red alternately.

Everybody looked at him in silence and their hearts were filled with unspeakable fear. Even Ouyang Feng was anxious; he gathered his 'qi' in his 'dan tian', his whole body alert, ready to take any attack. The entire boat was unusually quiet. Suddenly Huang Yaoshi let out a long laugh, sounding like a never ending dragon's roar.

This latest development took everybody by surprise and they were startled. They saw him facing skyward, laughing wildly and getting louder and louder. His laughter caused a chill in the air; those who listened to it felt more and more miserable. Gradually the laughter turned into weeping, a very sad weeping. The people could not bear it any longer; they felt like they shared his grief and were about to shed tears as well.

Ouyang Feng was the only one who knew his temperament well and knew that he used to sing and cry for no specific reason, hence he was not affected. But listening to him weeping so miserably he thought, "If he keeps crying like this, the Old Heretic Huang will inevitably injure himself. In past days Ruan Ji mourned the death of his mother and in doing so vomited a lot of blood. The Old Heretic Huang could experience the same fate as that person from the past. It was a pity my iron zither was lost when my boat sank, otherwise I could have played it and made his crying more interesting. This man has an unusual character; once he unleashes his uncontrolled emotions he will most likely suffer a serious internal injury. When it's time for the second Sword Meet of Mount Hua I will surely miss a worthy and formidable opponent. Ay! What a great loss! What a pity, what a pity!"

After crying for a while Huang Yaoshi lifted his jade flute and struck the rail of the boat while singing, "Why did God make someone's life so short? Why did someone die when all the hair on his head turned white, while the other died because of disaster or child-birth. The previous calamity had not yet passed, when the new one has come along. Morning had just blossomed, but the evening has already come, the dew came with the dawn and evaporated immediately. The departed cannot be pursued, the emotion suddenly fails. The high heaven does not have stairs; to whom shall I pour out my complaints to?"

With a 'Crack!' the jade flute was broken in two. Without turning his head Huang Yaoshi walked to the bow. Venerable Lingzhi dashed forward to block him and coldly said, "You wept and you laughed like a madman, what do you think you are doing?"

"Reverend, don't ..." Wanyan Honglie called out, but before he finished, Huang Yaoshi's right hand stretched out and

grabbed Venerable Lingzhi's neck. Turning him midair until his feet were facing upward Huang Yaoshi threw him down and his fat bald head penetrated the deck up to his shoulders.

It seems that in the martial arts Venerable Lingzhi practiced, his neck was his weakest point. As soon as he made his move, a highly skilled martial artist like Ouyang Feng, Zhou Botong and Huang Yaoshi could immediately see this flaw and attack his weakest point.

Huang Yaoshi continued singing, "The sky's eternal, the earth unchanging, how long will a man live? The past, the future, everything passes unawares; there is a time for everything." A dark green shadow flashed and he had already moved to his own boat, turned the rudder and sailed away.

The people on board were about to rescue Venerable Lingzhi who remained motionless; they did not know if he was alive or dead. Then suddenly they heard a grunt and the deck hatch opened and out came a young man. He was handsome, with red lips and white teeth, and a face like crown jade; it was Wanyan Honglie's son, Yang Kang, who's former name was Wanyan Kang.

After having a disagreement with Mu Nianci he kept remembering Wanyan Honglie's words, 'unlimited riches and honor'; soon after he contacted a Jin government office in the north to get information about him. Not long after, he found his father and thus accompanied him to the south. When Guo Jing and Huang Rong came onboard, he caught a glimpse of them and immediately hid inside the cabin, not daring to come out. He only peeked through a crack in the cabin's door and from there he clearly saw everything that happened on the deck. When the people were eating and drinking he was afraid Ouyang Feng was Guo Jing's

accomplice. He hid in the boat's hold and eavesdropped on the conversations at the banquet table, trying to find out Ouyang Feng's real intentions. Only after Huang Yaoshi left did he finally decide that he had nothing to worry about, so he opened the hatch-cover and came out.

Venerable Lingzhi's fall was truly severe; fortunately, due to his hard training, his head was strong. He'd made a hole in the deck, but his head was not injured and he was only a little bit dizzy. He calmed himself and pushed with both hands on the deck to heave his body up and stood.

The people looked at the round hole in the deck and then looked at each other in amazement. They thought it was funny, but felt it was inappropriate to laugh, so they kept their faces straight, but looked very awkward.

Wanyan Honglie broke the silence by saying, "Son, meet Mr. Ouyang."

Yang Kang immediately knelt in front of Ouyang Feng and kowtowed to him four times. This was a very big honor, surprising everyone. At the Zhao Palace Yang Kang had felt great admiration towards Venerable Lingzhi; but today he had seen Ouyang Feng, Zhou Botong and Huang Yaoshi, one after another, grab his neck and toss him back and forth like he was a baby. Only then did he realize there was a sky above the sky and there was another man above a man. He recalled the disgrace of being held captive at Cloud Manor on Lake Tai, and of when he was afraid of and lost his nerve to fight Guo Jing and Huang Rong at the Liu ancestral hall in Baoying...all because his skill was inferior to others. Now there was a man with very high skills in front of him and he wanted to take him as his master. After paying Ouyang Feng such respect he turned to Wanyan Honglie and said, "Father, your son wants to take this gentleman as my master."

Wanyan Honglie was delighted, quickly he stepped forward and bowed in respect to Ouyang Feng, saying, "My young child likes to learn martial arts, only he has not yet met a suitable master. If Sir does not refuse this request and is willing to bestow instructions, Little Prince and son will be forever grateful."

The others thought that being the young prince's master was the wish of all of them; who would have thought that Ouyang Feng would simply return the greeting and say, "There has always been a rule in the Old Man's martial arts school that our knowledge will be bestowed on one disciple only and no one else. The Old Man has already taken my nephew as my disciple; I can't take another one. For this I beg the Prince's forgiveness."

Seeing that Ouyang Feng did not grant his request Wanyan Honglie did not press the issue. He ordered his men to prepare more food and wine. Yang Kang, on the other hand, was quite disappointed.

Ouyang Feng smiled and said, "I don't deserve to be the young prince's master, but it will not be difficult for the Old Man to give you some pointers on martial arts. We will talk about it later."

Yang Kang had seen Ouyang Ke's many concubines and they had received instructions in martial arts from him; but because they were not his disciples their skills were nothing extraordinary. Listening to the way Ouyang Feng said it, he was not in the least enthusiastic, but his mouth was obliged to utter some grateful words. He had not realized that Ouyang Feng's skill was not to be compared with his nephew's; receiving one or two instructions on martial arts from an expert of Ouyang Feng's caliber would give him sufficient skill to boost his power and prestige among the heroes of the Wulin world.

Ouyang Feng noticed his expression and realized his intention to give instructions was not very well received; he never raised this matter again.

During the banquet they talked about Huang Yaoshi's arrogance and rudeness; they praised Venerable Lingzhi for fooling him so well. Hou Tonghai said, "That man's martial art's skills are truly high and it turns out that stinky girl is his daughter; no wonder her ways are crafty." While saying that he turned his attention towards Venerable Lingzhi's bald head. After staring for a while he turned his gaze toward Lingzhi's fat neck, and then he used his right arm to grab his own neck. "Hey, hey," he mocked and asked, "Shige [Older Martial Brother], those three used a grabbing skill, what kind of technique was that?"

"Don't talk nonsense!" Sha Tongtian rebuked him.

Venerable Lingzhi could not hold his patience any longer and he stretched out his left hand to grab the three carbuncles on Hou Tonghai's forehead. Hou Tonghai quickly shrank his body and slid under the table. Everybody laughed and cheered.

Hou Tonghai reappeared in his chair and said to Ouyang Feng, "Master Ouyang, your martial arts skill is very high indeed! How about you teach me the skill of grabbing someone's fat neck?" Ouyang Feng smiled but did not answer. Venerable Lingzhi glared at Hou Tonghai.

Hou Tonghai turned his head and asked again, "Shige, that Huang Yaoshi was crying and singing; what was he saying?"

Sha Tongtian glowered at him, not knowing how to answer. "Who cares about the gibbering of a madman?" he said.

Yang Kang explained, "What he sang was a poem written by Cao Zijian of the Three Kingdoms period. Cao Zijian

composed two stanzas of lamentations because of his daughter's death. In the poem he said how some people live until the hair on their heads had turned completely white, while some children died prematurely. He questioned why God was so unfair? He hated the fact that Heaven was so high and without stairs so that he could not ascend to God's throne to cry out his complaints. He finally said that his grief was so deep that the day he would follow her to the grave would not be far away."

The warriors immediately heaped him with praise, and said, "The Young Prince is truly a scholar and highly educated. We are rough men; how would we know?"

Huang Yaoshi's heart was filled with grief and indignation. He pointed his finger to the sky and scolded the heaven, cursed ghosts and blamed divine beings for treating him unjustly, for all his sorrows and unfair fate. He commanded his boat towards the mainland. Once he was ashore his anger flamed again. He looked up to the sky and shouted, "Who killed my Rong'er? Who killed my Rong'er?"

Suddenly a thought came into his mind, "It's that boy surnamed Guo. That's right, it was him. If not for him, why would Rong'er go aboard that boat? But that boy died alongside Rong'er; who should I unleash my anger on?"

As soon as he had this thought, he remembered Guo Jing's masters, the Six Freaks of Jiangnan. "Those six are the guiltiest of killing my Rong'er! If they hadn't taught that Guo kid, how would he have met Rong'er? I won't be appeased until I cut off their arms and legs one by one."

As his anger increased, his sorrow decreased somewhat. He arrived at a small town and stopped for some food, while still thinking deeply about how he would pursue the Six Freaks of Jiangnan. "The Six Freaks' martial arts skills are



not high, but their reputations are not low. Perhaps they have something that sets them above everybody else, or perhaps they only use deceit. If I pay a visit to their residence and inquire, chances are I am not going to find them. I must go in the middle of the night and break into their houses. Then I will wipe them and their families clean, young and old alike." Then he took big strides walking north towards Jiaying.

**End of Chapter 22.**

## Chapter 23 - Big Trouble in the Imperial Palace

Translated by Daniel Shultz, Bluebook & Frans Soetomo



*While they talked they arrived at the Broken Bridge by the West Lake. Because it was summer what they saw was lotus under the bridge. Huang Rong saw a neat little wine shop by the lakeside. "Let's drink a cup of wine and enjoy the lotus," she said. "Very good," Guo Jing agreed.*

Hong Qigong, Zhou Botong, Huang Rong and Guo Jing took a small boat to the west. Guo Jing rowed at the stern, while Huang Rong continuously pestered Zhou Botong with questions about riding sharks on the sea. Zhou Botong devised ways of catching sharks to amuse Huang Rong.

Guo Jing, observing his master's pale complexion, asked "Master, what are you thinking about?" Hong Qigong did not reply as he hoarsely took small breaths again and again. The strike he received from Ouyang Feng had penetrated to the bone. Although the acupoint had already been unsealed, the internal injury had actually worsened. Huang Rong fed him nine 'Nine Flower Jade Dew Pills'. Although the pain lessened somewhat, his breathing was just as bad as before. The Old Urchin, with complete disregard for the suffering of others, continued to make a ruckus and shouted that they must catch a shark. Huang Rong knew his behavior was inappropriate and tried signaling him with her eyes to be quite and not disturb Hong Qigong.

Zhou Botong, not understanding in the least, simply continued to cause a disturbance. Huang Rong frowned and said, "You want to catch sharks, but you don't have any bait to attract them, so what are you going on about?"

The Old Urchin never acted like a respected senior. When juniors drink and swear in front of him, he's never offended in the least. He suddenly said, "Got it! Brother Guo, I'll hold your hands while you dip the lower half of your body into the sea."

Guo Jing respected his sworn brother and even though he did not know his intentions, he quickly agreed. Huang Rong, just as quickly, called out, "Jing ge ge! Don't listen to him! He wants to use you as bait to catch sharks."

Zhou Botong clapped his hands and shouted happily, "Exactly! When a shark comes, I'll immediately whack it and pull it up! Or you could hold my hands and I'll attract the sharks."

Huang Rong replied, "You two are causing so much trouble on this small boat and if it capsizes, we'll have you to blame!"

Zhou Botong replied, "If the boat capsizes, that will be great! Then we can all play in the sea!"

Huang Rong replied, "And what about our Master? Do you want him to live or not?"

Zhou Botong held his head, at a loss for words. After a short time, he said that it was strange that Hong Qigong should be injured by Ouyang Feng's attack. Huang Rong shouted, "If you talk nonsense again, the three of us will not speak to you for three days and three nights!" Zhou Botong stuck out his tongue but did not dare to say another word. He grabbed an oar to help Guo Jing with the rowing.

Although land appeared to be close by, it was already dusk by the time they finally disembarked. That night the four of them slept on the sandy beach. The next morning, Hong Qigong's illness had worsened considerably and Guo Jing began to cry.

Hong Qigong said with a smile, "Even if I were to live for another hundred years, I'd still have to die in the end. Good child, I only have one wish left. Using this old beggar's last

breath, I would ask that the three of you do something for me.”

Huang Rong replied tearfully, “Master, please tell us.”

Zhou Botong interrupted, “That ‘Old Poison’ is a disgrace. Because of him old Senior is at the point of death. Before he died, my martial brother had to fake his death because of Old Poison. One person had to die twice...isn’t he satisfied? Old Beggar, you go right ahead and die and don’t worry about a thing. I will go and kill him to get revenge for you.”

Hong Qigong replied with a smile, “Avenging a grievance cannot be considered a final wish. What I want is to eat a bowl of minced ‘Five-Treasures Mandarin Duck’ from the Imperial Palace kitchen.”

Which of the three would have thought that his final wish was for food? Huang Rong replied, “Master, that’s easy. Since we’re not far from Lin’an so I’ll go steal several large pots from the Imperial Palace so that you can eat to your heart’s content.”

Zhou Botong interrupted again, “I also want to eat.”

Huang Rong gave him a displeased look and replied, “Do you also understand how to differentiate between good and bad food?”

Hong Qigong said, “The minced ‘Five-Treasures Mandarin Duck’ is hard to come by. Back in the day I hid in the Imperial Palace for three months and only managed to try a tiny bit. Just recalling the flavor is enough to make one drool.”

Zhou Botong said, “I have an idea, We’ll grab the old emperor’s chef and make him prepare it.”

Huang Rong replied, "Old Urchin, that's not a bad idea." Hearing Huang Rong supporting him, Zhou Botong was very pleased with himself.

Hong Qigong, shaking his head in disapproval, replied, "Not a chance. To make flavorful minced 'Five-Treasures Mandarin Duck', the kitchen implements, charcoal fire, and dishes must form a complete set. If even one is missing, the taste will be off. We still need to go to the Imperial Palace." Seeing that the three still had some misgivings, he said "It will be quite superb and if we go, you will all gain valuable experience."

Guo Jing immediately placed Hong Qigong on his back and set off to the north. Upon reaching a small town, Huang Rong sold some of her jewelry for cash and purchased a small mule cart to allow Hong Qigong to relax and recover from his injury. Eventually they passed the Qiangtang River and arrived at the outskirts of Lin'an Prefecture where they watched a vast misty sunset and heard the intermittent cawing of a crow. By nightfall they still had not reached the city and were forced to seek lodgings for the night. Looking around, they saw only a small village of several households near the riverbank.

Huang Rong spoke out, "This village looks good. We can rest here."

Zhou Botong replied sullenly, "What's so good about it?"

Huang Rong replied, "Take a look...doesn't this scenery sort of look like a painting?"

Zhou Botong replied, "How does it resemble a painting then?" Huang Rong stared blankly, having difficulty coming up with a response. Zhou Botong said, "That painting must be very ugly. Unless it is similar to the 'Old Urchin's' paintings, I'm afraid it must be inferior."

Huang Rong said with a smile, "Heaven has the ability to create a landscape, just like the 'Old Urchin's' random scribbling of a painting."

Zhou Botong, extremely pleased with himself, replied, "Are you certain? If you don't believe it, then I'll make a painting right now and you can ask Heaven to look."

Huang Rong replied, "Of course I believe it, but you've already said that this place is not good enough so don't rest here...but us three will stay."

Zhou Botong replied, "If the three of you won't go on, why on earth would I want to?"

In the midst of this chatter, they arrived at the village. The village center looked very desolate and dilapidated, with only a wine shop banner hanging off a pole at the eastern corner of the village near what sort of looked like the village inn. They arrived in front of the inn and saw two tables under the eaves, on top of which lay an extremely thick layer of dust.

Zhou Botong yelled "Hey!" loudly several times and a young girl of indeterminate age with disheveled hair and clothing came out. She opened her eyes and gave the three a blank, lifeless stare. Huang Rong ordered wine and food, but the girl only shook her head continuously.

Zhou Botong said, "You have neither wine nor food here... what kind of shop are you running?"

The girl shook her head and replied, "I don't know."

Zhou Botong replied, "Ai, you really are a silly girl."

The girl grinned and laughed, saying, "That's right, I'm called Sha Gu [silly girl /aunt]."

The three of them laughed and understood. Huang Rong went to take a look at the interior and the kitchen. She found them dust and cobweb covered along with a few pots and other old things. On a bed was a torn mat. One couldn't help but feel sympathy and sadness. She went back outside and inquired, "Is it just you living here?"

Sha Gu smiled and nodded. Huang Rong asked again, "What about your mother?"

Sha Gu replied, "Dead!" and wiped her hands across her eyes in imitation of somebody grieving.

Huang Rong asked again, "What about your father?"

Sha Gu shook her head, indicating she didn't know. They noticed that her face and hands were filthy and her long fingernails filled with black crud. Who knew how long it had been since she'd washed her face and hands.

Huang Rong said sadly, "Even if she did cook, we wouldn't be able to eat it." She asked, "Do you have any rice?"

Sha Gu smiled and nodded, producing half a jar of unpolished rice. Huang Rong immediately washed the rice and began preparing the meal. Guo Jing went to the west side of the village and bought two fish and a chicken. By the time everything was prepared it was already dark. Huang Rong brought out the food, placed it on one of the tables, and searched for an oil lamp. Sha Gu again shook her head, indicating there was none.

Huang Rong took some firewood and lit a fire in the furnace. Then she tried to find some bowls and chopsticks in the cupboard. She opened the cupboard's door and a foul stench attacked her nose. She held a burning piece of wood and saw there were about seven or eight shabby bowls. Inside and around the bowls were dozens of dead insects of



all kinds. Guo Jing helped her fetch the bowls.

“Wash them thoroughly and then get some small branches to use as chopsticks,” Huang Rong said. Guo Jing mumbled his compliance and took the bowls outside.

Huang Rong reached out to pick up the last bowl and immediately felt a difference. This bowl was cold, colder than a regular porcelain bowl. She tried to pick it up, but the bowl would not budge, as though it was attached to the cupboard. Huang Rong was astonished. She was afraid she might break the bowl, so she did not dare use too much strength. She tried it one more time but the bowl still refused to move. “Could it be that it has been there so long that the dirt made the bowl stick to the cupboard?” she wondered. She took a closer look and saw that the bowl was covered with many layers of rust. It was an iron bowl.

Huang Rong let out a soft laugh and thought, “I have seen rice bowls made of gold, silver and jade, but I have never ever heard of a rice bowl made of iron.” She exerted her strength and tried to lift the bowl up, but still the bowl did not move. She was even more surprised. She thought that with her strength, even if the bowl was nailed to the shelf, the shelf could be cracked. Then she had another thought, “Could it be that the shelf is also made of iron?” She stretched out her middle finger to tap the shelf and heard a metallic sound. The shelf was indeed made of iron.

Her curiosity was piqued and she tried lifting the bowl again but the bowl remained motionless. She tried turning the bowl to the left and did not perceive any movement. She tried turning it to the right and felt movement. She tried turning it harder and the bowl moved. Suddenly she heard a cracking sound and the cupboard slid aside, revealing a dark hole behind it. An even fouler stench came out of the hole, almost making her throw-up.

Huang Rong let out an “Ah!” and quickly leaped to the side. Guo Jing and Zhou Botong heard her cry and immediately came and saw the dark hole.

Huang Rong thought out loud, “Is it possible that this is a illegal wine shop and that Sha Gu is just pretending to be insane?”

She handed her burning branch to Guo Jing and walked over to Sha Gu and tried to grab her hand. Sha Gu waved her hand trying to avoid the grab and counterattacked by sending her palm towards Huang Rong’s shoulder. Even though Huang Rong suspected she did not have good intentions, she never expected that this incoming palm would carry such a powerful technique. She could not help but feel slightly startled. Her left hand formed a hook and her right hand came forward as she launched two strikes in succession.

Ever since she mastered the ‘Changing the Muscle Forging the Bone’ technique [yi jin duan gu bian] from the ‘Nine Yin Manual’, her speed and strength had increased tremendously. With a loud slap Sha Gu cried out as her right arm was hit, but her attack did not slow down. She counterattacked with two stances one after another. After several more stances Huang Rong was really astonished. Sha Gu’s moves were actually the Peach Blossom Island’s basic skill of the ‘Jade-Green Waves Palm technique’ [bi bo zhang fa]. Although it was performed with shallow skills, it was actually the foundation of all Peach Blossom Island’s martial arts. Every disciple had to learn it. Huang Rong intensified her attacks in an attempt to identify Sha Gu’s martial arts school, but Sha Gu dodged and weaved and was able to resist her for six or seven stances.

The situation was similar to when Guo Jing fought Liang Ziweng with only one stance, namely the ‘Proud Dragon

Shows Remorse', but her strength was greatly inferior to Guo Jing's. Moreover, her palm technique was very straightforward and showed not even the simplest variation. It was beyond anyone's expectations that in this remote village there was a illegal wine shop with a poor filthy girl who could fight Huang Rong for more than ten stances.

Zhou Botong found all these things very amusing. He noted that the gust of wind from Huang Rong's palm was swift and fierce. Sha Gu repeatedly cried out, "Aiyo!" while resisting Huang Rong's attack. Zhou Botong shouted, "Hey! Rong'er, don't harm her. Let me fight her." Along the way he heard Hong Qigong and Guo Jing calling her 'Rong'er' and she did not seem to mind, so he thought he did not need to be polite by calling her 'Huang guniang' or 'Huang xiaojie' [both mean Miss Huang].

Guo Jing was afraid Sha Gu had other companions waiting in the dark ready to ambush them, so he stayed closed to Hong Qigong and did not dare to leave him.

Several moves later Sha Gu's left shoulder was hit, which made her left arm go limp and she was unable to move it. If Huang Rong really wanted to injure her, all she had to do was continue her attack, but she showed mercy and called out, "Quickly kneel down and I'll spare your life."

"You kneel down too!" replied Sha Gu as she sent out two palms of the 'Jade-Green Wave Palm' technique towards Huang Rong. However, only the first two stances were executed repeatedly and her technique was clumsy.

This incomplete 'Jade-Green Wave Palm' palm attack lacked internal power but was continuous like waves in water, truly the martial arts style of Peach Blossom Island. Huang Rong's suspicions about Sha Gu's martial arts roots became

stronger. She called out “How did you learn the ‘Jade-Green Wave Palm’? Who is your master?”

Sha Gu responded with a smile “You can’t hit me no more, ha ... ha ...”

Huang Rong raised her left hand, moved her right hand to the side, feigned an attack with her left elbow and leaned her right shoulder forward. These four moves were fake attacks. Huang Rong followed with the fifth move by sending both hands curving inward. This fifth attack was also false. The next move, a kick, was real. Sha Gu was unable to stay upright. She fell to the floor and called out as she was getting up, “You used a trick, that does not count, let’s fight again,”.

Huang Rong did not allow her to stand up. She pounced and pushed her down, tore her clothes and bound her hands behind her back. “My palm technique is clearly better than yours,” she said.

Sha Gu turned around and shouted in dissent, “You tricked me, unacceptable...you tricked me, unacceptable!”

Guo Jing, seeing that Huang Rong was able to control Sha Gu, walked out of the inn and jumped onto the roof. He looked around for any traces of other people but found none. He jumped back down, walked around the building and noticed that this desolate inn was a stand-alone building, a few ‘zhangs’ apart from other houses in the area. There were no other people hiding around it. Now at last he felt relieved.

When he walked inside the inn, he saw Huang Rong holding a dagger in front of Sha Gu’s eyes, threatening her, “Who taught you martial arts? Tell me quickly or else I will kill you”. While saying that she made two stabbing moves with the dagger.

In the light from a candle, Sha Gu's smile could be seen. Looking at her expression, it did not seem like she was brave or mad. It was more a stupid smile, completely oblivious to the danger. It seemed like she was thinking that she and Huang Rong were just playing around. Huang Rong asked her again and Sha Gu laughed and said, "You kill me, I will kill you too!"

Huang Rong's eyebrows rose as she said "This stupid girl is not telling us anything, so we should take a look inside the hidden room. Big Brother Zhou, please take care of Master and keep an eye on this girl. Jing ge ge, let's go in."

Zhou Botong waved his hands and said, "No, I am going in with you."

Huang Rong told him, "I don't want you to come in with me."

Although Zhou Botong was a Senior with a higher level of martial arts, for some reason he did not dare to defy Huang Rong. He could only beg, "Good Miss, next time I won't argue with you."

Huang Rong smiled slightly and nodded her head. Zhou Botong was very happy. He found two pine branches, lit them, and fumigated the dark hidden room for a long time. The fumigated room still emitted a very foul odor. Huang Rong picked up a pine torch and threw it into the room. There was a clatter as the torch hit the far wall and fell to the floor. The room was not very deep at all.

With the light from a torch she looked inside. The room was quiet and there was no trace of people. At that moment Zhou Botong became impatient and snuck past Huang Rong into the room. Huang Rong followed Zhou Botong cautiously. The room was not large. In fact, it was quite

small. Zhou Botong cried out “We were fooled...we were fooled, this is no good!”

Huang Rong then let out an “ah!” sound as she spotted the skeleton of a person lying on the floor. The skeleton faced upward and the clothes had decayed. Two rows of the skeleton’s ribs were broken. There was another skeleton in the east corner of the room. This skeleton lay on top of an iron chest. There was a long sword blade penetrating the skeleton’s ribs and piercing the iron chest’s lid.

Zhou Botong noted that the room was small and dirty and he found those two corpses not that interesting. While Huang Rong carefully examined the two skeletons, Zhou Botong got really impatient and wanted to interrupt her. But he feared that Huang Rong might get angry so he did not dare say anything and behaved quietly. Inside, his mind was going crazy. He asked her, “Rong’er, Good Miss, I can go out now, can't I?”

Huang Rong said “Fine, you can go. Get Jing ge ge for me.”

Zhou Botong ran out happily and said to Guo Jing, “Go in quickly, it’s very interesting in there,” He was afraid Huang Rong might call him back but he’d found a replacement. Guo Jing went in.

Huang Rong raised her torch to show Guo Jing the skeletons and asked, “How do you think these two people died?”

Guo Jing pointed to the skeleton on the iron chest; “Looks like this person died while trying to open the iron chest. He died from sneak attack with one thrust. The other person has two rows of shattered ribs, so he was probably attacked by a palm of great internal strength.”

Huang Rong said, "I think so too, but there are some things I don't quite understand."

Guo Jing replied, "What things?"

"Sha Gu obviously used Peach Blossoming Island's 'Jade-Green Wave Palm' technique. Although she only knew six or seven moves and was not very proficient, her technique was good and correct," Huang Rong said. "The two dead people...I wonder what their connection is to Sha Gu."

Guo Jing responded, "I will ask the girl." Because he was often called 'stupid kid' by others he was not willing to call that girl 'Sha Gu' [stupid / silly aunt].

"I truly think that girl is retarded, so it will be difficult to get any information from her. Perhaps we can investigate what little evidence we have here on our own," Huang Rong suggested. She lifted her torch and slowly examined the skeleton on the chest and noticed a shiny object beside it. She picked it up and looked carefully. It was a gold medallion. In the middle, there is a gate engraved into the gold. On the back of the medallion, there were several engraved characters that read 'By royal decree bestowed on the loyal martial arts master responsible for defending the state, special guard Shi Yanming'.

Huang Rong said, "If this medallion is his, this government officer's rank was not low."

Guo Jing replied, "A high-ranking official died in here...this is strange."

Huang Rong checked the skeleton on the floor again and she noticed something sticking out of the rib area. She used the torch to push on it. The object fell, raising a cloud of dust, revealing a sheet made of iron. She called out in a low shocked voice and picked up the object.

Guo Jing also saw the object in her hand, "Ah!" he exclaimed.

"Do you recognize this?" Huang Rong asked.

"Certainly," Guo Jing replied, "This is the iron 'Eight Trigram' [ba gua] of Village Master Lu of Cloud Manor."

"It is an iron 'ba gua' alright, but it doesn't necessarily belong to Martial Brother Lu," Huang Rong said.

"That's right!" Guo Jing said, "These two men's clothes and flesh have decomposed. They have been here for at least ten years."

Huang Rong was silent for a long time. Suddenly a thought came into her mind. She pulled out the blade stuck in the iron chest's lid, brought it close to the flame and she saw the character 'Qu' engraved on the blade. She could not help blurting, "The one lying on the floor was my older Martial Brother Qu [Qu Shige]."

"Ah!" Guo Jing exclaimed in surprise.

"Martial Brother Lu said that Martial Brother Qu was still alive. Who would have thought that he was already dead in this place ... Jing ge ge, look at his leg bones," Huang Rong said.

Guo Jing stooped down and looked, "Both of his legs were broken. Ah, it was your father who broke them," he said.

Huang Rong nodded her head. "He is indeed Qu Lingfeng. My father once said that amongst his disciples, Martial Brother Qu had the strongest martial arts. He was also my father's favorite ..." At this point she suddenly dashed out the room. Guo Jing followed.



Huang Rong quickly went over to Sha Gu and asked, "Your surname is Qu, isn't it?" Sha Gu giggled but did not answer.

Guo Jing gently asked, "Miss, what is your surname?"

"Surname...surname!" Sha Gu said giggling.

The two wanted to ask further, but Zhou Botong called out, "I am starving! I am starving!"

"Alright," Huang Rong said, "We'll need to eat first." She untied Sha Gu and invited her to eat with them. Sha Gu was not bashful about it as she smiled, held out her hands to take a bowl, and ate.

Huang Rong told Hong Qigong everything she'd found in the secret room. Hong Qigong also thought it was peculiar. "It seems like that government officer named Shi killed your Martial Brother Qu. Who would have thought that your Martial Brother Qu, before he breathed his last, threw the blade and killed him."

"Most probably so," Huang Rong concurred. She took the blade and the iron 'ba gua' and showed them to Sha Gu. "Whose are these?" she asked.

Sha Gu's countenance suddenly changed. She leaned her head sideways to think, seemed as though she recalled something, but after a while her expression went blank. She shook her head and took the blade, unwilling to let it go.

"Apparently she has seen this blade before," Huang Rong said. "But it must have been a long time ago and she can't remember anymore."

After they finished eating she took care of Hong Qigong and let him sleep. Then she and Guo Jing went back to the room to take a further look. They thought the key to this mystery must be hidden inside the iron chest, so they removed the

skeleton lying on top of it and opened the lid. It turned out the lid was unlocked and could be opened easily. In the torch light their eyes were dazzled by a chest full of gleaming pearls, jade, and all sorts of treasures and antiques.

Guo Jing only felt surprise, but Huang Rong knew each article was a very rare and precious treasure. Her father's collection was not as extensive as the contents of this chest. She grabbed a handful of pearls and let them roll through her fingers. The pearls made nice clinking sounds as they fell back into the chest and hit other pearls and jades. She sighed, "There must be a history behind all these treasures. If father were here he would be able tell us the origins of each." She took them one by one and explained what they were to Guo Jing. This one was a jade bracelet, this one a rhino skin case, that one was a carnelian cup, that one was an emerald dish, and so on.

Guo Jing grew up on the steppes, and as a result, not only he had never seen these kinds of treasures, he had never even heard of them. He thought, "People spent so much effort to collect these objects. What were they going to do with them?"

While she spoke, Huang Rong continued to grope around in the chest. Her hand touched a piece of hard board and she knew there must be another layer underneath it. She moved the jewelry aside and saw rings attached to the board, so she inserted her little fingers inside the rings and lifted the board up. Beneath it were a bunch of greenish bronze colored antiques. Her father had shown her illustrations of some antique bronze ware. She recognized them to be an imperial culture tripod [long wen ding], an article from the Shang Dynasty (16th to 11th century BC) [shang yi], a plate from Zhou Dynasty (1027BC) [zhou pan], another article from Zhou Dynasty [zhou dun], tableware

from Zhou Dynasty [zhou ju lei] and so on. In the end she had to admit she did not know much detail about the articles. If the pearls and jades were considered treasures worth a fortune, then these bronze antiques were priceless.

The more Huang Rong looked at them, the more she marveled. She lifted another board beneath the antiques and discovered rolls and rolls of paintings. She asked for Guo Jing's help and together they unrolled the paintings one by one. She was shocked! The first painting was Wu Daozi's 'Send off a child heavenward' [song zi tian wang tu]. The next painting was Han Ganhua's 'Herding horses' [mu ma tu] and the other was the Southern Tang Dynasty's Li Houzhu's 'Crossing the forest spring' [lin quan du zhui ren wu]. Altogether there were more than twenty scrolls and every single one of them had originated from the brush of a famous artist. Several scrolls were calligraphy and paintings by Huizong, while several others were by contemporary artists. Each one of them was of the most exquisite and highest quality. Among them were examples of the imperial court's artist Liang Kai's unique two-rolls splashing ink characters, with very vivid images. Some of it reminded her of Zhou Botong.

Huang Rong had only looked at about half of them but did not feel like continuing, so she returned everything to the chest, closed the lid and sat on top of it, hugging her knees. She thought, "Father has amassed all kinds of treasures during his life, but the value of his collection might only be one tenth of the contents of this chest. How did Martial Brother Qu have the ability to obtain so many rare and priceless treasures?" No matter how hard she racked her brain she could not think of a good explanation.

When Huang Rong was thinking hard, Guo Jing never dared disturb her train of thought. He stayed quiet until he heard Zhou Botong calling from outside, "Hey! Get out of there

quickly! We need to visit the old emperor's house for some minced 'Five-Treasures Mandarin Duck'!"

"Tonight?" Guo Jing asked.

Hong Qigong replied, "The sooner the better. I am afraid I can't hold on much longer."

"Master, don't listen to the Old Urchin speaking a lot of nonsense," Huang Rong said, "We can't go tonight. We will enter the city gate tomorrow in the early morning. If the Old Urchin gets anymore weird ideas, we won't let him come to the palace with us."

"Humph!" Zhou Botong snorted, "Once again I am to blame." He sulked and refused to talk.

That night the four slept on the straw beds laid-out on the floor. Early the next morning Huang Rong and Guo Jing prepared some breakfast and the four, plus Sha Gu, ate together. Huang Rong turned the iron bowl, closed the cabinet wall and put all chipped bowls and broken utensils back inside the cabinet. Sha Gu was indifferent to what was going on around her as she held the handle of the sword in her hand and played with it.

Huang Rong took a small ingot of silver [yuan bao] from her pocket and gave it to her. Sha Gu took it and casually tossed in on the table. "If you are hungry you can use it to buy rice and meat," Huang Rong said. It was hard to say if Sha Gu understood, since she only giggled foolishly.

Huang Rong felt sadness creeping into her heart knowing that this girl must have some relationship with Qu Lingfeng. If she wasn't a member of his family, then she must be his disciple. Her six or seven stances of 'Jade-Green Waves Palm technique' [bi bo zhang fa] definitely came from Qu Lingfeng, even though she had only roughly learned it.

What Huang Rong did not know was whether she had been retarded since birth, or did she have a horrifying experience which shocked and damaged her mind. She wanted to find more information about her in the village, but Zhou Botong kept urging them to move onward. Therefore the four, with their cart, went straight through and entered the city of Lin'an.

Lin'an was, at this time, the world's most bustling city. When the Song government moved south, it was established as the new capital. All kinds of people converged on the city and it continued to flourish.

The four entered the city via the east gate and went straight to the 'Beautiful Portal Gate' [li cheng men] of the Imperial Palace. Hong Qigong remained inside the cart while Zhou Botong and the others looked around. They saw golden nails in the scarlet doors, painted beams, engraved railings and copper tiles covering the roof. There were sculptures of flying dragons and phoenixes, all magnificent in their splendor dazzling their eyes.

"Interesting!" Zhou Botong called out loudly as he took a step to enter.

The palace guards stationed in front of the gate had noticed these three people, one old and two young, with a mule cart making noises in front of the Imperial Palace gate. Four guards with axes in their hands had already stepped forward with menacing looks on their faces.

Zhou Botong loved creating a disturbance very much. Watching the guards with their distinctive armor, tall and powerfully built, he was itching to have an interesting fight.

"Go quickly!" Huang Rong called out.

Zhou Botong stared at her. "What are you afraid of? Do you think these babies can eat the Old Urchin?" he asked.

Huang Rong quickly said, "Jing ge ge, let's go and play someplace else. Since the Old Urchin is not listening, we'll just ignore him." She flicked her whip and the cart sped along to the west. Guo Jing followed behind. Zhou Botong was afraid he would get left behind while they went someplace more interesting, so he ignored the guards and ran to catch up. The guards thought they were simple villagers looking around the city, so they laughed loudly and did not pursue them. Huang Rong drove the cart to a deserted place. Seeing that nobody chased them, they stopped.

"Why didn't we break into the palace? Could those wine bags and rice sacks [the guards] stop us?" Zhou Botong asked.

"Certainly breaking in is not difficult, but let me ask you... are we here to fight or to go to the kitchen and steal some food?" Huang Rong said, "If you break in, the palace will be in chaos. Do you think the chef will quietly make some 'Five-Treasures Mandarin Duck' for Master to eat?"

"Fighting and capturing people is the guards' business and it has nothing to do with the chef," Zhou Botong reasoned. Actually, what he said did make some sense and Huang Rong was momentarily at a loss, but she was not willing to yield to him, so she argued, "The imperial chef can both prepare food and capture people."

Zhou Botong stared at her but did not know how to respond. A long while later he conceded, "Fine, let's just consider I was wrong."

"What do you mean 'consider'? You were wrong right from the start," Huang Rong said.

"Fine, fine," Zhou Botong said, "Don't consider anything... don't consider anything." Turning his head to Guo Jing he said, "Brother, all the women in the world are very ferocious. That's why the Old Urchin said don't take a wife."

Huang Rong laughed, "Jing ge ge is a good man, so other women won't be ferocious towards him."

"Are you saying I am not a good man?" Zhou Botong asked.

Huang Rong smiled, "Are you? You don't want to take a wife and other people don't like the way you handle things. You only create trouble and disturbances. Tell me, why don't you want to take a wife?"

Zhou Botong leaned his head to one side to think, unable to answer. His face turned red, and then pale and it seemed like his mind was full of anxiety. Huang Rong had very seldom seen him this serious, and was astonished.

"Let's find an inn to stay in. We'll come back to the palace tonight," Guo Jing said.

"That's a good idea!" Huang Rong agreed, "Master, as soon as we find an inn, I am going to prepare a couple of simple dishes as your appetizers and we will have a feast later on tonight." Hong Qigong was delighted and he cheered repeatedly.

The four stayed at the Jin Hua inn on the street west of the Imperial Palace. True to her word, Huang Rong prepared three dishes and a soup for Hong Qigong. The aroma spread around the inn causing the guests to ask the innkeeper which famous chef had cooked this fine cuisine.

Zhou Botong was still mad at Huang Rong's words hinting that he could not find a wife, so he sulked and refused to

eat. The three of them knew his childish behavior. They only laughed and did not pay any attention to him.

After eating, Hong Qigong lay down to rest. Guo Jing asked Zhou Botong to go out and play, but he was still angry and ignored Guo Jing. Huang Rong chuckled and said, "Then you'd better look after my Master nicely and when I return, I will buy some fun things for you to play with."

"You are not lying?" Zhou Botong asked, delighted.

Huang Rong smiled, "'When a word has already left the mouth, it is difficult for four horses to chase it' [yi yan ji chu, si ma nan zhui]."

During the spring when Huang Rong left home to go north, she visited Lin'an for one day, but that city was too close to Peach Blossom Island and she was afraid her father might find her. She did not dare to stay too long so her visit was a quick one. This time the days were long and nothing burdened her mind. Hand in hand with Guo Jing they went to the West Lake (xi hu).

She noticed Guo Jing's countenance showed anxiety and knew he worried about their master's injury. "Master said there is one person in this world who can heal his injury," Huang Rong said. "But he would not allow me to ask. From the way he talked, it must be that Emperor Duan, but we don't know where he is. We must find a way to ask him to heal Master."

"That'll be great," Guo Jing said happily. "Rong'er, do you think we can ask him?"

Huang Rong replied, "I am still thinking of how to ask. During our meal today I tried to fish some information from Master. He was just about to say something when he realized it and stopped talking immediately. I must get this



information from him eventually.” Guo Jing knew her abilities very well so he was greatly relieved.

They were still talking as they arrived at the Broken Bridge by the lakeside. That ‘duan qiao can xue’ [the broken bridge where people can see the remnants of the snow] was one of the West Lake’s more famous sights, but it was summer so all they saw were the lotus under the bridge. Huang Rong saw a neat little wine shop by the lakeside. “Let’s drink a cup of wine while we enjoy the lotus,” she said.

“Very good,” Guo Jing agreed. The two went in and sat down. The shopkeeper delivered some wine and dishes of meat which tasted very good. They drank wine while enjoying the scenery and were in a good mood.

Huang Rong saw a screen by the eastern window, covered with jade-green muslin. Obviously the shop owner regarded the screen as a very precious object. Her curiosity was piqued, so she went over to take a closer look. It turned out that beneath the muslin there was a poem inscribed on the screen. It was the ‘Wind Entering the Pine’ [feng ru song], which read,

‘Spring time is always spent wasting money, drinking daily by the lakeside. Riding a buckskin horse along the road toward the West Lake, proudly passing in front of a tavern. Singing and dancing amidst the sweet fragrance of red apricots, swinging in the shadow of green willows. Warm winds embraced ten ‘li’ of beautiful women and sky, crushed flowers adorned the sides of their temples. Picturesque boats carrying incense going back and forth are like smoke covering the water. Comeback tomorrow supporting the remnants of drunkenness, seeking the fancy golden inlay on the pathway.’

Huang Rong said, “This poem is a good one.”

Guo Jing asked her to explain the meaning of the poem. The more he listened, the more upset he became and he said, "This is the capital of the Great Song Dynasty and these government officials spend their days drinking wine and enjoying flowers. Don't they care or even pay attention to the affairs of the country?"

Huang Rong replied, "Exactly, these people talk shamelessly!"

Suddenly someone behind them said, "Humph! What do you two know enough about to talk such nonsense?"

They turned around and saw a man dressed as a scholar, roughly forty years of age, sneering at them. Guo Jing greeted the scholar by cupping his hands and said, "Junior does not understand and would like to ask Mister for advice."

The man replied, "This is the most splendid work of Yu Guobao in the year of Chun Xi. That year the retired Emperor Gaozong came to drink wine, saw the work and praised it greatly. That very same day the emperor granted Yu Guobao a government position. This is a scholar's lifelong dream, and the two of you ridicule absurdly it!"

"So it is because the Emperor saw this screen that the innkeeper covers it with jade-green muslin?" Huang Rong asked.

The man laughed coldly and said, "How can it be so? Look at the sentence 'Comeback tomorrow supporting the remnants of drunkenness' on the screen. Did you notice that this one sentence has two revised characters?"

Huang Rong and Guo Jing examined it more closely and found the character 'fu' [carrying or supporting somebody]

was formerly 'xie' [bringing/carrying along], and the character 'zui' [drunkenness] was actually 'jiu' [wine].

The man then said, "Yu Guobao originally intended to write 'Comeback tomorrow bringing the remnants of the wine'." The retired Emperor smiled and said, 'Although this phrase is good, it is rather simple-minded.' Hence he took a brush to revise those two characters. That was truly heaven sent wisdom and farsightedness, like transforming iron into gold." He swayed his head and sighed as if he was enjoying it tremendously.

Guo Jing listened and became angry. He yelled loudly, "This emperor Gaozong put Qin Gui in an important position in order to harm and kill Master Yue [General Yue Fei]!" His leg flew out and kicked the screen, smashing it. He reached backwards to catch the scholar and pull him forward. With a splashing sound wine spilled everywhere as that man, head up feet down, sank into the wine vat.

Huang Rong loudly applauded and laughed, "I too will make correction to those two sentences. They are, 'Today standing upright spoiling the wine, the gentleman sank into the vat drunk.'"

As the scholar's head emerged from the wine jar with wine dripping from it, he said, "The oblique tone of 'drunk' does not rhyme well."

Huang Rong replied, "'Wind entering the pine' does not rhyme well. My poem 'Man entering the jar' rhymes better!" She extended her hand and firmly pressed his head down inside the wine jar, and then flipped the table over, causing an outburst. The customers and the wine shop keeper scrambled out of the shop. Guo Jing and Huang Rong stood up and pounded and smashed all the wine vats, pots and cauldrons. Finally, using the 'Eighteen-Dragon

Subduing Palms', Guo Jing exerted all his strength to strike the main support pillar of the inn, causing the roof to collapse. In a brief moment, a large restaurant was transformed into a pile of wood that hardly resembled anything.

Guo Jing and Huang Rong laughed loudly. Holding each other's hands, they walked north. Nobody knew where this mad young man and young woman came from but who dared pursue them?

Guo Jing laughed, "That was such a good trashing that all the bad air in my chest went away completely."

Huang Rong replied happily, "Whenever we see anything unsightly, we will smash it."

Guo Jing replied, "Good!"

Since leaving Peach Blossom Island, the two had gone through many unfavorable situations. Although they were reunited, their Master had suffered a serious and difficult to heal injury and this made their hearts heavy with worry. At this time they unexpectedly had the chance to break up a restaurant and it had helped to vent their frustrations. The couple leisurely walked along the lake-shore and saw poems everywhere...on rocks, on trees, on pavilions and on the walls. They were written either by travelers bidding their farewells, or young men expressing their love.

Guo Jing did not understand the poems, but when he saw the words 'wind', 'flower', 'snow' and 'moon' he sighed and said, "Even if we had a thousand pairs of fists, we can't break them all. Rong'er, you have learned literature and art...what are all these for?"

Huang Rong smiled. "There were some good ones among these poems," she said.

Guo Jing shook his head. "I still think fists and kicks are more useful," he said.

While walking and talking they reached the 'Flew in Peak' [fei lai feng]. There was a pavilion built on that peak. Above the gateway there were three characters 'Jade-Green Small Pavilion' [cui wei ting] in Han Shizong's handwriting. Guo Jing knew Han Shizong's reputation. Upon seeing the handwriting of the general who resisted the Jin army he was delighted. He quickly walked into the pavilion. There was a stone monument inside, with a poem inscribed on it reading:

'With the passing years dust has settled on the battle uniforms, especially seeking some fragrant jade-green wine, not enough to only see good mountains and good rivers, taking advantage of the bright moon light the return of horse hoofs.'

This seemed to be the handwriting of Han Shizhong as well.

"This is a good poem," Guo Jing praised. Actually, he did not know a good poem from a bad one, but he believed this poem was Han Shizhong's. It also contained words like 'battle uniforms' [zheng yi] and 'horse hoofs' [ma ti], so it must be good.

Huang Rong said, "That was Master Yue, Yue Fei's work."

Guo Jing was surprised and asked, "How do you know?"

Huang Rong replied, "I listened to father tell the story. In the winter of the eleventh year of Shaoxing, Master Yue died at the hands of Qin Gui. In the spring of the following year, in remembrance of him, Han Shizhong built this pavilion and engraved this poem as a memorial. Unfortunately, Qin Gui was very influential during that period, so he could not openly commemorate Master Yue."

Remembering the previous dynasty's General, Guo Jing reached out his hand and ran his finger along the inscriptions in the stone. While he was lost in thought Huang Rong suddenly pulled his sleeve and jumped towards the bushes behind the pavilion and pushed his head down. As they were crouching, they heard the footsteps of people entering the pavilion. A moment later they heard someone say, "Han Shizhong was a hero. His lady, Liang Hongyu, although a former prostitute, helped her husband achieve victory by beating drums during the battle. She could be considered a heroine."

Guo Jing thought this voice was somewhat familiar but could not remember who it was. Again another man said, "Yue Fei and Han Shizhong were heroes, but the emperor wanted them dead and stripped them of their military leadership. Both Han and Yue had to follow orders. Obviously the emperor held the power that even heroes like them could not defy."

Guo Jing listened to the accent and recognized that this person was Yang Kang. Guo Jing was startled and wondered, "What is Yang Kang doing here?" Still surprised, another broken cymbal-like voice confounded him even more. It was the Western Poison Ouyang Feng. He heard Ouyang Feng say, "That's correct. With muddle-headed ruler reigning, just like the previous dynasty, it doesn't matter how great a hero is...he is useless."

The first man then said, "But if a wise ruler is on the throne, a great hero like Mr. Ouyang could help him greatly to achieve his aspirations."

Listening to those two speak, Guo Jing suddenly recognized that the other one was the enemy who'd killed his father, the Sixth Prince of the Great Jin, Wanyan Honglie. Even though he had seen Wanyan Honglie's face before, he'd not

often heard his voice and was therefore unable to recognize it for a moment.

The three talked and laughed and then they left. Guo Jing waited until they had gone far enough and then asked no one in particular, "What are they doing in Lin'an? How come Brother Kang is with them?"

"Humph," Huang Rong snorted, "I realized earlier that this brother of yours is not a good person. You still say that he is the descendant of a hero. You have been deceived. Now you understand his real intentions. If he is really a good man, how could he accompany those two scoundrels?"

Guo Jing was very much bewildered, "I don't understand," he said. Thereupon Huang Rong told him everything she'd heard in the Fragrant Snow Hall of the Zhao Palace. She said, "Wanyan Honglie gathered Peng Lianhu and the other fellows to help with his plan to steal Master Yue's Wumu's Legacy. Now they suddenly arrive here. Perhaps this Legacy is in Lin'an. If they succeed, then our Great Song's common people will suffer great calamities."

Guo Jing shivered with fear, "We simply cannot let them succeed," he said.

Huang Rong said, "The problem is that the Western Poison is traveling with them."

"Are you afraid?" Guo Jing asked.

"Aren't you?" Huang Rong asked back.

Guo Jing replied, "Naturally I am frightened of the Western Poison, but this is not a small matter. We ... even if we are afraid, we cannot simply overlook it."

Huang Rong smiled, "If you must take care of it, then naturally I will follow you."

“Very well,” Guo Jing said, “Let’s go after them.”

Leaving the pavilion they could not see any trace of Wanyan Honglie’s group and were forced to look randomly around the city. Lin’an was a big city, so how could they find what they were looking for in a short period of time? After walking for a long time, the sky turned dark as the two arrived in front of the ‘Martial Arts Garden’ [wu lin yuan] at Zhong Wazi. Huang Rong saw a shop with a lot of masks with vividly drawn features hanging in its entrance. She was amused and remembered her promise to buy something fun for Zhou Botong. She spent five silver coins and bought ‘the king of ghosts’ [zhong kui], ‘the judge of hell’ [pan guan], ‘kitchen god’ [zao jun], ‘earth god’ [tu di], ‘soldier of heaven’ [shen bing] and other ghosts and supernatural beings, more than a dozen masks in all.

While the shopkeeper was wrapping the masks with paper, there came the sweet fragrance of food and wine from a restaurant next door. The two had been walking for a long time and were starving. “What restaurant is that?” Huang Rong asked.

The shopkeeper smiled and said, “So it turns out you two are new to the capital. No wonder you don’t know. The ‘Three-Primary Tavern’ [san yuan lou] is very well-known in our Lin’an. The wine, the food, and the utensils are number one under heaven. You two cannot not leave without trying it.”

Huang Rong’s heart was stirred by what he said. She took the masks and then pulled Guo Jing to the front of ‘Three-Primary Tavern’. They could see that the building was decorated with colorful paint and had a row of red and green fencing. Beneath the second floor roof hung flower-patterned lanterns. The interior was lined with luxurious



wood inlay and the pavilion looked elegant and unconventional. It was truly an exquisite tavern.

As the two walked in they were welcomed by a waiter with a smiling face and were led through a corridor to a chamber already set with bowls and chopsticks. Huang Rong immediately placed an order and the waiter left to prepare the food.

In the candlelight Guo Jing saw more than a dozen courtesans with heavy makeup sitting in a row on a nearby porch. He wondered who they were and was about to ask when, from the chamber next door, he suddenly heard Wanyan Honglie's voice call out, "That's fine! Send somebody to sing and join us drinking wine."

Guo Jing and Huang Rong looked at each other and thought, "Just like the saying goes, 'wearing out iron shoes to look around, finding the result without any effort.'"

A summons was heard and a woman gracefully stood up and walked towards the chamber next door with a pair of ivory planks in her hands. A short moment later the woman started to sing. Huang Rong tilted her head to listen to her song:

"The southeast appears victorious, the rivers and lakes (Jianghu) convene, Qiantang River always flourishes from the ancient times. The bridge looks like a painting of smoking willow; the wind blows the wine shop sign and the jade-green curtain, amidst a hundred thousand people. Cloudy trees wind around the sandy dike, angry waves roll up like frosty snow, the sky and the moat around the city are boundless. Rows of pearls line up in the market, the homes compete with each other to show their extravagance. The clear water lake is surrounded by three autumn cassia buds and ten 'li of lotuses. Along the clear

alleys the water chestnut songs floating through the night, enticing old gentlemen to the lotus-like dolls. A thousand riders gather around the ivory tower, intoxicated by the sound of flute and drum, enjoying the rosy-cloud smoke. A particular day to paint fine scenery, as the phoenix returns to the pond of praise.”

Guo Jing did not understand the sing-song sound of her singing, but he did enjoy the gentle tapping of her ivory planks and the melodious sound of the flute.

As the song finished, both Wanyan Honglie and Yang Kang proclaimed their praise. “You sing very well!”

The woman repeatedly expressed her gratitude and jubilantly went out with the musicians while wishing Wanyan Honglie much enjoyment.

Wanyan Honglie said, “Son, do you know that this Liu Yong [Eternal Willow] poem, ‘Gazing at the Ocean Tides’ [wang hai chao], has a close relationship with our Great Jin?”

“Your child does not know,” Yang Kang replied. “Would Papa [Die] please explain?”

Hearing him calling Wanyan Honglie ‘Papa’ in an affectionate tone, Guo Jing and Huang Rong looked at each other. Guo Jing was angry and broken hearted. He wished he could go over, grab him, and ask for an explanation.

He heard Wanyan Honglie reply, “During the prosperous years of our Great Jin, the Jin Lord Liang saw this poem by Liu Yong, which praises the beauty of the West Lake’s scenery. Thereupon he sent an emissary south and at the same time dispatched a famous painter to paint the scenery around the City of Lin’an. The painter inserted the Jin Lord’s image in the painting, sitting on horseback on the peak of Wu Shan [Wu Mountain]. The Jin Lord wrote this

poem on the painting: "Ten thousands of li riding on a chariot, how can there be another border to Jiangnan? Dispatching soldiers by the millions to the West Lake, on a horse's back to stand on Wu Shan's first peak!"

"What a grand and heroic spirit!" Yang Kang praised.

Guo Jing was so angry hearing him that he clenched his fist so hard, his knuckles made cracking sounds.

Wanyan Honglie sighed. "Jin Lord Liang's desire to dispatch soldiers to the south and to stand on Wu Shan on horseback did not come true, but his heroic spirit to cross the river was inherited by us, his descendants. Once he inscribed this poem on a folding fan: 'With a great fan in the hand, bringing a cool breeze over the entire world.' That's the kind of ambition he had!"

Yang Kang repeated that poem. "With a great fan in the hand, bringing a cool breeze over the entire world." He sounded like he was really impressed by it.

Ouyang Feng laughed and said, "Someday the Prince's dream of having great authority and standing on Wu Shan will come true."

Wanyan Honglie quietly said, "I do hope Sir's words will come true. There are too many ears and eyes around here...let's just drink some wine." So the three people changed the topic of their conversation immediately and instead talked about the scenery, what they'd seen and heard about local conditions and social customs.

Huang Rong whispered into Guo Jing's ear, "They are having a good time drinking wine and I don't want them to have a good time." The two slipped away from their chamber and went to the backyard. Huang Rong took out her flint and ignited the firewood in a shed and spread the

fire around. In a short moment flames arose and people shouted in confusion, "Fire!" Then they heard copper gongs being struck noisily.

"Quick...we must go to the front or we'll lose track of them again," Huang Rong said.

Guo Jing was filled with hatred. "Tonight I must kill that traitor Wanyan Honglie!" he said.

Huang Rong said, "First we must take Master to the palace to eat. Afterwards we will entreat the Old Urchin to face the Western Poison. Only then can we deal with the other two traitors."

"That's right," Guo Jing said.

Amidst the commotion, the two walked to the front of the restaurant just as Wanyan Honglie, Ouyang Feng and Yang Kang emerged from the building. Guo Jing and Huang Rong followed them at a distance through streets and alleys towards the west market. They entered the Guan Gai Inn. The two waited outside the inn for a long time without seeing Wanyan Honglie or the others coming back out. They concluded that they must be staying here. "Let's return to our inn, fetch the Old Urchin, and come back here to deal with them," Huang Rong said. They went back to the Jin Hua Inn immediately.

Approaching the inn they heard Zhou Botong shouting. Guo Jing was frightened because he thought his Master's injury was getting worse. He rushed forward anxiously only to see Zhou Botong squatting on the ground squabbling with six or seven boys. As it turned out, he was gambling with these kids in front of the inn's gate and he'd lost. He argued with the kids, and the kids argued back, hence the noise.

With Huang Rong's return he was afraid she would scold him, so he turned around and went back into the inn. Huang Rong smiled and brought out the masks. Zhou Botong was delighted and squealed again and again. He put on a mask and become the 'Judge of Hell', and then became a little demon.

Huang Rong expressed their desire to take him back to help them fight the Western Poison. Zhou Botong readily agreed. "Don't worry," he said, "My two hands can use two different fist techniques to fight him."

Huang Rong recalled the time on Peach Blossom Island when Zhou Botong was afraid he might involuntarily use the martial arts from the 'Nine Yin Manual'. He tied his own hands and as a result was injured by her father. "The Western Poison is very bad," she said, "You can't be considered disobeying your martial brother's death wish if you injure him with the martial arts from the manual."

Zhou Botong stared hard at her. "No, I can't do it" he said. "I have trained hard and I don't need to use the techniques from the manual."

By this time Hong Qigong's heart was already inside the Imperial Palace's kitchen. He had waited until the second hour of this night with great difficulty. Guo Jing carried Hong Qigong on his back and the four walked on the roofs towards the Imperial Palace. The palace was taller than the other buildings and its roof glittered with gold inlay. It was very easy to identify. Before long, very quietly and without making any noises, the four leaped over the palace's wall.

The security inside the palace was tight and guards patrolled everywhere. But with the level of lightness kungfu Zhou, Guo and Huang possessed, how could they be caught by the guards? Hong Qigong knew where the kitchen was

and in a low voice he explained the way to it. In a few moments they had arrived at the imperial kitchen, located behind the 'Six Ministry Hill' [liu bu shan]. The kitchen was to the east of 'Fine Bright Hall' [jia ming dian], where the imperial meals were being prepared. These places were adjacent to the imperial sleeping chamber and the imperial personal office. All were closely guarded with alarm gongs everywhere. By this time the emperor had already gone to bed and the imperial kitchen staff had been dismissed. The four people arrived at the well-lit kitchen where several young court eunuchs slumbered inside.

Guo Jing helped Hong Qigong sit on a beam while Huang Rong and Zhou Botong looked for already cooked meals in the kitchen cabinets. Very soon the four began to eat.

Zhou Botong shook his head, "Old Beggar, the food here can't be compared to Rong'er's culinary skills. I don't understand why you so earnestly desired to come here."

Hong Qigong replied, "I wanted to eat the minced 'Five-Treasures Mandarin Duck'. I don't know where the chef lives...but tomorrow we will catch him. Then we'll force him to prepare something more to your taste."

"I can't believe his culinary skill is superior to Rong'er's," Zhou Botong said.

Huang Rong smiled. She knew he wanted to thank her for the masks, which was why he praised her repeatedly.

"I want to stay here and wait for the chef," Hong Qigong said, "Since you are bored, why don't you and Jing'er go out of the palace and let Rong'er stay with me. Tomorrow night you can come back."

Zhou Botong put on the 'City God' mask and laughed. "No," he said, "I want to stay here with you. Tomorrow I am going

to wear this mask to scare the old emperor. Brother Guo, Rong'er, you keep your eyes on the Old Poison. Don't let him steal Yue Fei's legacy."

"What the Old Urchin said was very reasonable," Hong Qigong said. "Go quickly and be careful." The two gave their promise.

"Don't fight the Old Poison tonight. Wait for me tomorrow," Zhou Botong said.

"We can't beat him so naturally we won't fight," Huang Rong said. She, along with Guo Jing, slipped away from the imperial kitchen with the intention of going back to the Guan Gai Inn to observe Wanyan Honglie and the others' activities.

They tiptoed through two halls in the dark. Suddenly they felt a cool breeze and faintly heard the sound of water. In the stillness of the night they could also smell a faint delicate fragrance from deep in the palace courtyard. Unexpectedly they'd come across a wooded hill placed inside the palace.

Huang Rong sniffed and knew there must be a flower garden nearby. She thought there must be many wonderful flowers and unusual plants in the Imperial Palace garden. Since she was there, she certainly could not pass up this rare opportunity to take a look. So she tugged Guo Jing's hand and followed the flowery fragrance, looking for the garden.

Gradually the sound of water grew louder. The two walked on flower-lined paths and saw pine and bamboo trees blocking the deep blue sky above along with beautiful hills quietly standing in the background. Huang Rong was deeply impressed with this place. Even though the

landscaping was inferior to that of Peach Blossom Island, the flowers and trees were exquisitely beautiful.

They walked several zhangs further and saw a streak of water appearing like a silver waterfall coming out from the side of a hill. The water ran down to a pond, and in turn, a stream of water came out of the pond so that it would not overflow. There were countless red lotuses strewn across the surface of the pond. Directly in front of the pond was a hall entrance dense with flowers. Just above the entrance were written the three characters 'Jade-Green Cold Hall' [cui han tang].

Huang Rong walked to the front of the hall. Below the porch she saw some stairs leading upwards, surrounded by many kinds of flowers: 'jasmine' [mo li], 'fragrant vegetable' [su xin], 'musk deer fragrant rattan' [she xiang teng], 'vermillion hibiscus' [shu jin], 'jade cassia' [yu gui], and 'red banana' [hong jiao]. Each was the kind of fragrant plants that bloom in summer. Towards the back of the hall, orchids and other scented plants hung. Sweet smelling incense burned, filling the hall and assailing their nostrils.

On a table inside the hall were several bowls of lotus root, sweet melon, loquat, and many kinds of wild fruits from the forest. Several round fans were strewn about on the chairs. It seemed that this was the hall where the emperor enjoyed the cool evening breeze before going to bed.

Guo Jing sighed. "The emperor really knows how to enjoy life," he said.

Huang Rong laughed. "Now you can be one," she said, pulling Guo Jing along to sit on a couch. She offered him the bowl of fruits and knelt down. "Long live master. Please enjoy some fresh fruits," she said.



Guo Jing smiled and picked up a loquat. "Please rise," he said.

Huang Rong laughed, "Emperors never says 'please'. That is too polite," she said.

As they talked and laughed in low voices they suddenly heard someone shout in the distance, "Who's there?" They were startled. Leaping out of the hall they hid behind a fake hill. They heard heavy footsteps as two men came shouting loudly. Guo Jing and Huang Rong listened to these people and knew their martial arts skills were low. They was nothing to worry about. The guards brandished their sabers while rushing towards the front of the hall. They looked around but didn't see anything out of the ordinary.

"You saw a ghost," one guard said, laughing.

The other one was also laughing. "I am always seeing things these past few days," he said. They walked away, still talking and laughing.

Huang Rong was inwardly amused. She tugged Guo Jing's hand to leave, but suddenly heard those two guards grunt...'hey...hey'. Although the noise was deep and muffled, they knew it was the sound of exhaling because their acupoints were being sealed. Guo Jing and Huang Rong both thought, "Did Big Brother Zhou get bored and came out to play?"

They heard someone speak in a low voice, "According to the Imperial Palace map, the building next to the waterfall is the 'Jade-Green Cold Hall'. We are going there." The voice belonged to Wanyan Honglie.

Guo Jing and Huang Rong were very shocked. They grabbed each other's hands and hid even deeper behind the fake hill, not daring to make a sound. In the dim

glimmering starlight they saw shadows moving in front of the hall. They vaguely recognized that, besides Wanyan Honglie, there was Ouyang Feng, Peng Lianhu, Sha Tongtian, the Venerable Lingzhi, Liang Ziweng and Hou Tonghai.

Guo Jing and Huang Rong were puzzled. "What are these people doing in the Imperial Palace?" they thought. "Could it be they also want to steal some food from the imperial kitchen?"

They heard Wanyan Honglie speak again, still in low voice. "The Little Prince has carefully examined the secret letter Yue Fei left behind and also the documents from the dynasties two emperors, Gaozong and Xiaozong. I concluded that the Wumu Legacy is hidden fifteen steps east of the 'Jade-Green Cold Hall'."

Everyone's eyes automatically followed the direction of his hand. Fifteen steps east of the hall was the waterfall and nothing else. Wanyan Honglie said, "How the book could be hidden in the waterfall? The Little Prince found hard to understand, but according to the documents, this is the correct place."

Sha Tongtian was known as the 'Dragon King of the Demonic Group' [gui men long wang] and his water skills were excellent. "I'll go and take a look at the waterfall," he said. Without waiting, he stepped forward and jumped into the water. Not long afterward he reemerged. Everybody rushed forward to meet him, only to hear him say, "The Prince reasoned correctly. Behind the waterfall there is a cave with a closed iron gate."

Wanyan Honglie was ecstatic. "The Wumu Legacy must be inside the cave," he said. "I am afraid I'll have to

inconvenience you gentlemen and have you to open the iron gate.”

Everybody unsheathed their prized sabers and sharp blades, ready to comply with his request and each wanting to render meritorious service. They raced to the waterfall. Ouyang Feng laughed coldly and stayed at Wanyan Honglie’s side. He felt his reputation was different, so he was not willing to fetch the book with the others.

Sha Tongtian was the first to duck under the flowing water. Suddenly a gust of wind assaulted his face. He’d just come in to take a look and saw nothing. How could he guess an enemy would suddenly attack him? He hurriedly avoided the attack, but his left wrist was suddenly grabbed by the enemy and he was pushed hard. Against his wish, his body flew out and hit Liang Ziweng hard. Luckily both men’s martial arts skills were quite high and they were not injured.

Everyone was taken by surprise. In the meantime, Sha Tongtian entered the waterfall again...but this time he was ready. He raised both palms in front of his face and, sure enough, from behind the waterfall a fist came flying out. He used his left hand to parry while launching a counterattack with his right. During all this, he had not seen clearly who the enemy was.

Liang Ziweng had also jumped into the waterfall. A stick suddenly came sweeping close to the ground. Liang Ziweng tried to evade it, but he was too late. The lower part of his leg was hit squarely and he could not maintain his balance and fell backwards. As his chest was being hit by the waterfall, his leg was again hit by the stick. Against his will, his body fell outside the waterfall.

By this time Sha Tongtian had also been pushed outside of the waterfall by a swift and fierce palm. The 'Three-Headed Dragon' Hou Tonghai did not think about the martial arts skills his martial brother had compared to his own skills. If his martial brother was so easily defeated, how could he hope to achieve success? Relying on his superb water skills and his ability to open his eyes and see underwater, he charged into the waterfall.

Looking at the adverse situation, Peng Lianhu rushed forward to join the battle. Suddenly a dark and rather shiny shadow flew above his head. With a 'Bang!' that shadow fell to the ground and then he heard Hou Tonghai cry loudly in pain. Peng Lianhu quickly went over and said in a low voice, "Brother Hou [Hou Xiong]...be quiet! What happened?"

"Damn his granny!" Hou Tonghai cursed. "My butt is broken into four pieces from the fall."

Peng Lianhu was confounded and amused at the same time. "Is there such a thing?" he whispered. He stretched his hand to check Hou Tonghai's buttocks, seemingly checking to see if they were still in one piece. He found nothing injured. He knew something was amiss, but he did not want to face the danger rashly. "Who's inside?" he asked.

Still in pain Hou Tonghai became angry. "How would I know?" he snapped. "As soon as I went in, I was thrown back out. That scoundrel of a bastard!"

In the starlight they saw the Venerable Lingzhi's red robe fluttering as he entered the waterfall in big strides. Amidst the sound of the water gurgling, they could hear his loud shouts in Tibetan. It seemed like he was fighting an intense battle with the man inside.

Everyone looked at each other in surprise. Sha Tongtian and Liang Ziweng had been thrown out. But in the darkness

they vaguely saw, behind the curtain of water, a man and a woman. The man was barehanded and the woman had a stick in her hand. At this time they heard the Venerable Lingzhi's loud roar. It seemed he had suffered hardships as well.

Wanyan Honglie frowned. "Why is this Venerable so reckless? He called out so earth shatteringly loud. If the palace guards heard it and come here, how will we get the book?" he said.

He had just finished speaking when they saw the Venerable Lingzhi's red kasaya [Tibetan Robe] fly out from the waterfall and land floating on the red lotus pond, followed by two clanking sounds as the two copper cymbals that he used as weapons also flew out. Peng Lianhu was afraid the cymbals would make a loud noise if they hit the ground and thus alert the palace guards. He stretched out his hands and caught the cymbals. They heard loud shouts of Tibetan curse words coming from the waterfall, which nobody could understand, followed by a huge body flying out.

Luckily the Venerable Lingzhi's martial arts were different from Hou Tonghai's. Although he fell backwards, he was able to land softly, so his buttocks were not injured at all. He cursed aloud, "It's the boy and the girl we met on the boat."

When Guo Jing and Huang Rong were hiding behind the fake hill, they heard Wanyan Honglie order the people to go into the cave and steal the book. They thought that if the Wumu Legacy was obtained by him, the Jin army could follow Yue Wumu's military strategies to invade the south, which would be disastrous. They realized that Ouyang Feng was around and that they were not his match, but if they did not step forward bravely, how would they bear it if, in the future, the common people of the world suffered such a disaster?

At first Huang Rong wanted to find a way to scare these people away, but Guo Jing knew that the situation was critical and they had no time to hesitate. He immediately grabbed Huang Rong's hand and slipped behind the waterfall. They were hoping to set up an ambush and attack Ouyang Feng by surprise. Luckily the waterfall's rumbling was so loud that nobody heard their movements.

The two did all they could to repel Sha Tongtian and the others. They were pleasantly surprised with the results and did not expect the Manual's 'Changing Muscles Forging Bones' to be that marvelous. Huang Rong's 'Dog-Beating Stick' had infinite variations. So amazing were they that even men of Sha Tongtian and the Venerable Lingzhi's caliber were thrown into confused helplessness. Guo Jing took advantage of the situation to send out his palms and as a result they managed to throw everyone out of the waterfall.

Guo Jing and Huang Rong knew that as Sha Tongtian and the others were defeated, Ouyang Feng would go into action and that they absolutely could not fight against him. "Let's get out of here quickly!" Huang Rong said, "We have to raise the alarm and let the palace guards come and prevent these people from acting further."

"That's right!" Guo Jing said, "You go out and raise the alarm. I am staying here on guard."

"You must not fight the Old Poison," Huang Rong said.

"Yes. Now go! Go!" Guo Jing said.

Huang Rong was about to go out through the hole behind the waterfall when they suddenly heard a loud grunt and a great burst of energy came through the waterfall from the outside. The two did not dare to block it and leaped sideways to evade that energy. With a loud roar, Ouyang

Feng's 'Toad Stance' energy penetrated the waterfall and hit the iron gate. Water splashed everywhere and the force was astonishing.

Although Huang Rong managed to leap sideways, her back was still hit by the 'Toad Stance's' lateral force. She felt her blood rushing and her vision blurred. She tried to focus her mind and then dashed outside shouting at the top of her lungs, "Seize the assassin! Seize the assassin!" She ran away while continuing to shout.

As she shouted, the palace guards all around the 'Jade-Green Cold Hall' were startled awake. Shouting began immediately from everywhere, raising the alarm. Huang Rong jumped up on the roof of the hall, picked up some roof tiles, and 'Bing...bing...bang...bang!' randomly threw them to the ground.

"Kill that little girl first, then we'll talk," Peng Lianhu cursed. Launching his lightness kungfu, he gave chase. Liang Ziwen jumped to the left, trying to block her.

Wanyan Honglie was still calm. He said to Yang Kang, "Kang'er, go with Mr. Ouyang and get the book."

By this time Ouyang Feng was already squatting on the ground in front of the waterfall. With another grunt he sent another burst of energy and the double iron gate at the cave's mouth flew in. He was about to enter the cave, when from one side, a shadow suddenly attacked. Before the person even arrived, his palm had already come, launching the dangerous stance of the 'Flying Dragon Soaring Through the Heavens' [fei long zai tian]. Although he could not clearly see that person's appearance in the dark cave, as soon as he saw the stance he knew it must be Guo Jing. He was delighted, "The 'Nine Yin Manual' is exceptionally difficult to comprehend and I only understand two out of

ten sentences. If I can capture this kid, I can force him to explain it.” He leaned sideways to evade the attack then swiftly stretched out his hand, trying to grab Guo Jing’s back.

Guo Jing was determined that no matter what he had to do to guard the entrance, he would not let the enemy enter. As long as he could hold it for a while, the palace guards would come. Although this group of traitors’ martial arts was high, they would have to run away eventually. He was slightly puzzled to see Ouyang Feng not trying to kill him but merely trying to capture him. His left hand swept the attacking hand away and his right hand counterattacked with the ‘Vacant Fist’ technique. Even though, in terms of strength, this technique was inferior to the ‘Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms’, by using the ‘Vacant Fist’, his palms floated with tricky movements.

“Good!” Ouyang Feng exclaimed. He dropped his shoulder and pulled back his hand while trying to catch Guo Jing’s right arm. His hand did not carry the gust of wind that came with his usual swift and ferocious force.

While he was on the deserted island, Ouyang Feng studied the Manual Guo Jing wrote out. The more he practiced it the more he felt something was wrong. It never crossed his mind that the Manual in his hands was altered to the point of being somewhat unintelligible. He thought that the Manual carried a very deep and profound meaning which could not be deciphered in a short period of time. Later on he heard Hong Qigong mumbling some gibberish on the raft which he thought was the key to understanding the Manual. Also, every time he met Guo Jing, he noticed that his martial arts were continuously progressing. He was startled yet delighted at the same time. Startled: because this kid’s skills were improving so rapidly. Therefore, the power contained in the Manual must be truly something to



be feared. Delighted: because the Manual was in his hands. By strengthening his own background, his advancement in the future would be limitless.

On the raft he fought a life and death battle against two enemies. This time he felt that he had gained the upper hand and wanted to fight at a leisurely pace. He thought he would be able to dissect the manual by watching Guo Jing's every single move. He did not care whether the Wumu Legacy would be stolen or not. In his heart the only important matter right was the martial arts in the Manual.

By now the light from the many lanterns carried all around the area had made the 'Jade-Green Cold Hall' bright as daylight, as more and more palace guards arrived. Wanyan Honglie noted that Ouyang Feng and Yang Kang had been behind the water's curtain for a very long time without coming back out. Meanwhile the palace guards gathered around them. He was getting increasingly anxious. Fortunately the guards' attention was concentrated by Peng Lianhu and Liang Ziweng on the roof chasing after Huang Rong, oblivious that there was a bigger fight going on inside the waterfall. He realized, however, that sooner or later the guards' would detect their presence there. He stomped his feet and waved his hands continuously, while urgently calling out, "Quick...quick!"

"Don't worry Prince, little monk will go in again," the Venerable Lingzhi said. Shaking his left palm in front of his body he entered the waterfall. By now the light from outside had penetrated the water curtain. He was able to see Ouyang Feng exchanging stances with Guo Jing in front of the cave entrance, while Yang Kang, at one side, was trying to get into the cave. But how could he pass through the two people's ferocious gusts of wind created by their palms?

The Venerable Lingzhi watched for several stances until he could not endure it any longer. He knew the present situation was very urgent. But Ouyang Feng was sparring leisurely with this kid. Truly he was a bastard. "Mr. Ouyang, let me help you!" he shouted.

"Don't come near me!" Ouyang Feng replied.

The Venerable Lingzhi thought, "In a situation like this you still flaunt yourself as a hero and display your reputation as a grandmaster of a martial arts school?" He bent his knees and attacked Guo Jing's left side. His 'Big Hand Imprint' [da shou yin] slapped Guo Jing's 'Sun' [tai yang] acupoint.

Ouyang Feng was angry. His right hand stretched out to grab the back of Lingzhi's neck and fling him out. As soon as his neck was grabbed, the Venerable Lingzhi became very angry and he shouted a series of the most obscene cuss words he could think of. Unfortunately he was speaking Tibetan, so Ouyang Feng naturally did not understand a word he was saying. All he heard was "Ba ni mi hong"... half a sentence because water started to get into his mouth and his curses were drowned. As he fell backwards with his face facing the sky, he landed in the pond and water began filling his mouth.

Wanyan Honglie saw the Venerable Lingzhi come flying out and fall like he was mounting the clouds and riding the mist. Then he heard a loud clanking noise as the big flower pot in front of the 'Jade-Green Cold Hall' was crushed. He groaned inwardly. He also saw many palace guards coming in succession, so he hastily tucked in his robe and went inside the waterfall.

Although he had learned some martial arts, his skill was only so-so. As soon as he was inside the waterfall he stepped on the slippery surface and fell down. Yang Kang rushed

forward to help him up. It took a while for Wanyan Honglie to scan the cave and see what was going on. "Mr. Ouyang, can you expel this youngster?" he called out. He knew that no matter how he begged or entreated, Ouyang Feng might not necessarily pay any attention to him. Therefore he resorted to subtlety by asking if Ouyang Feng was capable of expelling Guo Jing. This was called 'dispatching a general is not as good as inciting a general'.

Sure enough, as soon as Ouyang Feng heard that, he replied, "Why not?" He squatted and with a loud grunt, sent his 'Toad Stance' energy forward through his palms. This one push was backed by his lifelong cultivation of internal energy. Even if Hong Qigong or Huang Yaoshi were here, they would not be able to resist this attack head on, so how could Guo Jing block it?

Ouyang Feng had just exchanged several stances with Guo Jing, compelling him to use the 'Vacant Fist' technique. He noticed that Guo Jing's movements were subtle with marvelous variations. In his heart he was secretly pleased and thought this must be the 'Nine Yin Manual's' martial arts. He wanted to watch Guo Jing use enough of this technique so that he could steal as much as he could. Unfortunately, Wanyan Honglie barged in and questioned his ability. He still thought that Guo Jing would be useful, and he knew the ferociousness of his own strength, therefore, he voluntarily withdrew his push.

But unexpectedly, Guo Jing was determined to guard the Wumu Legacy with his life. He knew that if he stepped to the side, the cave entrance would be defenseless and the Wumu Legacy would fall into the enemy's hands. Although there were numerous palace guards outside, how could they defend against Ouyang Feng and the others? He knew the incoming force was ferocious. He could not block it, yet he must evade it. His feet kicked jump about four feet

upwards to escape the attack and landed back in front of the entrance. He heard a loud noise behind him as sand and rocks fell because Ouyang Feng's force had hit the cave wall.

"Good!" Ouyang Feng called out. With exceptional speed he sent out the second attack. The previous force had not yet dissipated before the next force arrived.

Guo Jing felt a sudden gust of wind blowing on his upper body. He groaned inwardly and immediately launched both palms forward using the 'Tremors Shake a Hundred li' [zhen jing bai li]. It was one of the most powerful moves of the 'Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms'. This time he'd blocked hard with a 'hard' stance. For an instant both of them stayed motionless. Guo Jing realized his strength was not a match for his enemy's and he knew he would suffer defeat, but there was no alternative.

Wanyan Honglie watched these two men fighting, leaping and eluding. As one rose up the other dropped down. Suddenly they were as rigid as corpses. Not even a finger stirred and they did not even seem to breathe. He was greatly astonished. A short moment later sweat began to drip from Guo Jing's body. Ouyang Feng knew that if this fight continued his opponent would suffer a serious injury. He had a mind to yield for half a stance, but as soon as he lessened his power his chest tightened because his opponent's power was pressing in. If not for his profound strength he would certainly have been injured.

Ouyang Feng was startled. He had never expected that at such a young age, Guo Jing's strength would be so fierce. He took a deep breath and counterattacked immediately, pushing the incoming force back. If he just added a little bit more strength to his push, he would be able to overcome Guo Jing easily. But at this time, both parties palm strength

was equal. If he wanted to score a victory he would have to inflict heavy injuries on his opponent. It would not be difficult should he really want to kill Guo Jing, but this kid was the key to understanding the Manual, so how could he destroy his only resource? Therefore, he intended to wait for Guo Jing's strength to become depleted and then capture him.

Not too much later it became obvious that as one's strength declined, the other's increased. Wanyan Honglie and Yang Kang, who watched from the sidelines, did not know how much longer this situation would last. They became very anxious. Actually, the two people had only been in this deadlock for a short time, but because the light from outside was getting brighter and the noise from outside was getting louder, it seemed in Wanyan Honglie and Yang Kang's minds that they had been motionless for a very long time.

With a loud noise, two palace guards suddenly came barging into the waterfall. Yang Kang swiftly pounced. With a 'ta, ta' sound both of his hands penetrated the guards bodies. It was the deadly 'Nine Yin White Bone Claw' [jiu yin bai zhua gong]. The reeking smell of blood assailed everyone's nostrils as the guards died instantly. Yang Kang then drew a dagger from his boot and jumped forward to stab Guo Jing in the side.

Guo Jing was resisting Ouyang Feng's palm with all his strength. How could he avoid this incoming thrust? He knew if he moved even a little bit he would die violently from the Western Poison's 'Toad Stance'. Therefore, even though he knew the dagger would penetrate his body soon, he was forced to ignore it. He suddenly felt a severe pain in his side and his breathing stopped. He instinctively swung his fist and hit Yang Kang's hand.

By this time the difference in the levels of martial arts between these two was vast. Guo Jing's fist struck Yang Kang's hand like it was about to crack bones. Yang Kang hastily withdrew his hand so that the dagger's blade only penetrated halfway into Guo Jing's side. Right at that moment the 'Toad Stance's' force came surging into Guo Jing's chest. He let out a noiseless grunt, bent over, and fell down.

Realizing that in the end he had inflicted injury, Ouyang Feng waved his hand and shook his head. "What a pity! What a pity!" he called out. He was dejected and knew that this kid could not be revived. There was no reason why he should hang around since he still had to get the Wumu Legacy. He stared at Yang Kang angrily and thought, "This kid has spoiled my big chance." He turned around and entered the cave in big strides. Wanyan Honglie and Yang Kang followed behind.

By that time there were a lot of palace guards there. Without turning, Ouyang Feng reached back and, one by one, flung the guards away. In the end, no guards were able to enter the cave.

Yang Kang lit a torch to see the cave's interior. He saw thick dust everywhere...a sign that nobody had entered it for a very long time. There was a stone table in the middle of the cave and a stone box on top of it, measuring about two feet square. The box was sealed. Other than that, no other objects could be seen inside the cave. Yang Kang brought his torch closer to take a look. The writing on the seal looked very old and the characters were not recognizable.

"The book must be inside this box," Wanyan Honglie called out.

Yang Kang was delighted. As he reached out his hand to take the box, Ouyang Feng's left arm gently pushed his shoulder away. Yang Kang staggered back several steps before falling down. He was startled and saw that Ouyang Feng had taken the box.

"The great work is accomplished...everyone withdraw!" Wanyan Honglie called out.

With Ouyang Feng in front leading the way, the three went out of the cave. Yang Kang saw Guo Jing, his body covered with blood, lying motionless among several guards at the cave entrance. He felt slight remorse and muttered under his breath, "You don't know good from bad and always meddle in other people's business. You can't blame me for this in spite of our sworn brotherhood." Remembering his dagger was still in Guo Jing's body, he stooped to retrieve it and suddenly saw a shadow appear outside. "Jing ge ge, where are you?" the shadow called out.

Yang Kang recognized Huang Rong's voice. He was startled and without taking his dagger he jumped over Guo Jing's body and ran outside of the water curtain to follow Ouyang Feng and the others.

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Earlier, Huang Rong had been rushing to the east and running to the west on the rooftops with Peng Lianhu and Liang Ziweng in pursuit. Not long afterwards, palace guards began to gather in the area. Peng and Liang were frightened and did not dare chase Huang Rong any longer, so they went back to join Sha Tongtian and the others waiting for Wanyan Honglie by the waterfall. They killed several guards outside the cave before Ouyang Feng came out.

Huang Rong was concerned about Guo Jing, so she went back inside the cave and called out several times without getting an answer. She was beginning to get nervous, so she struck her flint to her fire-starter bundle and saw Guo Jing, his body soaked in blood, lying next to her foot. Huang Rong was scared to death and her hands began to tremble, her fire-starter bundle fell and the fire went out.

Outside the cave, the guards were still shouting loudly, calling to each other to capture the assassin. More than a dozen guards were grabbed and tossed away by Ouyang Feng with broken necks. No one dared go near them any longer. The palace guards carried a heavy burden of responsibility and presently there was an assassin in the palace. If they did not shout loudly and appear bold by not running away, how else could they show their loyalty?

Huang Rong stooped down to hold Guo Jing, noticed that his hand was still warm and felt relieved. She called out several times without getting an answer from him, so she decided to carry him on her back and quietly slipped away from the waterfall towards the back of the false hill.

By now the area around the 'Jade-Green Cold Hall' was as bright as daylight from the guard's lanterns. Guards from other parts of the palace had heard the news and arrived in abundance. Even though Huang Rong's movements were quick, it was impossible to avoid being seen by several guards. They shouted loudly and began to chase her. Huang Rong silently cursed. "You are a bunch of scum. You don't pursue the bad people but chase after the good people."

She gritted her teeth and flew away. Several guards with higher martial arts skills managed to get close to her, forcing her to launch several steel needles. "Aiyo!" she heard several guards cry out and fall down. The rest of the guards did not dare pursue her and could only look



helplessly at her as she leaped over the palace wall and disappeared without a trace.

Those people were so noisy that the whole palace was frightened. In the dark of the night nobody knew if it was a coup with somebody trying to usurp the emperor's throne, or some government officers inciting a rebellion. The palace guards, the imperial army, and all the armed forces personnel were alarmed, but not a single high-ranking military officer knew what was going on for sure. They were confused for the rest of the night. Come daybreak the cavalry was dispatched and the city was turned upside down in search of 'the rebels' or 'the assassin'. Quite a number of people were arrested. Unfortunately, later investigations proved that these people were nothing but petty thieves and local ruffians. The officials were forced to fabricate oral confessions and randomly execute some people in order to appease the throne and to assure their own safety and position.

After leaving the palace that night, Huang Rong ran without looking where she was heading. She randomly chose her way and only slowed down after realizing that nobody was pursuing them. She entered a small alley and stretched her finger to feel for Guo Jing's breath. She was relieved to find Guo Jing was still breathing, but since her flint had been lost in the palace, in the darkness she could not examine him to determine where the injury was. She knew if she waited for dawn, it would be more difficult to find shelter inside the city walls, especially with her having a blood-covered person with her, so she decided to leave the city that very same night and headed towards Sha Gu's wine shop.

Huang Rong's martial arts skills were high, but after running fast for half the night and carrying Guo Jing on her back, it was with a nervous heart that she shoved open the

door of Sha Gu's shop. She was out of breath and her body felt weak. She sat down to calm herself. After catching her breath she found a piece of firewood and lit it so she could look at Guo Jing's face and examine his wound. She was even more shocked than when they were at the palace.

Guo Jing's eyes were tightly closed, his face was as white as a sheet, and he looked more dead than alive. Huang Rong had seen him injured several times before, but had never seen him in this kind of critical condition. She felt as though her own heart was about to jump out of her throat. As she stood lost in thought with the torch in her hand a hand suddenly reached out from the side and touched the torch. Huang Rong slowly turned her head and saw that it was Sha Gu. Huang Rong sucked in a deep breath. Now that there was someone beside her, she felt somewhat better. She remembered that she was going to examine Guo Jing's injury. Under the bright light of the torch she could see a blackish object protruding from Guo Jing's side. It looked like the ebony hilt of a dagger. She lowered her head for a closer look and saw that it was indeed a dagger with the blade stuck in Guo Jing's left side.

By this time Huang Rong's panic had reached its limits and her mind became calm. She gently tore the clothes from around his waist, exposing bare skin and muscle. She saw that the blood had coagulated around the blade, which had penetrated the muscle several 'cun' deep [1 cun is approximately 1 inch]. She was afraid if she pulled the dagger out, Guo Jing would die immediately, but if she waited too long it would be even more difficult to save his life. Biting her lips, she reached out to grab the dagger's hilt, but doubt suddenly came creeping into her heart and she withdrew her hand. This happened several times. She just could not make up her mind.

Sha Gu became impatient. The fourth time Huang Rong withdrew her hand, she suddenly stretched out hers, grabbed the hilt and abruptly pulled the dagger out. Both Guo Jing and Huang Rong shouted in shock, but Sha Gu thought it was fun and laughed happily.

Huang Rong saw blood gushing like a spring from Guo Jing's wound, while Sha Gu was still laughed foolishly. Huang Rong went from shock to anger. Her palm struck backwards sending Sha Gu rolling on the floor. Then she immediately stooped down to press the wound with a handkerchief.

When Sha Gu fell, she took the torch with her. The flame was extinguished and the room became pitch-black. Sha Gu was angry. She jumped up and kicked Huang Rong's leg. Huang Rong did not avoid the kick. Sha Gu was afraid Huang Rong would retaliate, so she jumped back immediately after kicking. After a while, she heard Huang Rong sobbing softly. She was surprised. Hastily she re-lit the torch and came asking, "Did I hurt you bad?"

When the dagger was pulled out, the pain was so severe it woke Guo Jing up. In the torch light he saw Huang Rong kneeling beside him. "Master Yue's book ... was it ... was it stolen?" he quickly asked.

Huang Rong was delighted to hear him speak. Knowing he was very concerned about this matter she felt it was not the right time to add to his anxiety. "Don't worry," she said, "Those traitors were not able to get their hands on the book ..." She wanted to ask how he was feeling but her hands were still warm from his blood.

"Why are you crying?" Guo Jing asked in a low voice.

Huang Rong forced a smile and said, "I am not crying."

Sha Gu suddenly opened her mouth, "She is too, isn't she? Look, there are still tears on her face."

"Rong'er, don't worry." Guo Jing said. "There is a section about treating injuries in the 'Nine Yin Manual'. I won't die."

Upon hearing this, Huang Rong was like someone in the dark suddenly seeing a beacon of light. Her eyes shone brightly and her delight was unspeakable as though nothing could dampen her spirits. She wanted to ask for the details but was afraid she would make him weary. She turned around to hold Sha Gu's hand. "Sister, did I hurt you just now?" she asked, with smile on her face.

Sha Gu's mind was still set on seeing her cry so she ignored her question and asked, "You were crying...won't you admit it?"

Huang Rong smiled, "Fine, I was crying but you weren't. You are a good girl." Sha Gu was delighted to hear her praise.

Guo Jing slowly circulated his 'qi' because the pain was unbearable. By this time Huang Rong had cleared her mind. She took out a steel needle and pierced the acupoints around his left side, both to slow down the flow of blood and to reduce the pain. Then she washed his wound, applied some medicine and re-wrapped the wound with clean cloth. She also gave him a 'Nine Flower Jade Dew Pill' to help stop the pain.

Guo Jing said, "Although the dagger went in pretty deep, but ... luckily it did not hit any vital organs, so it ... it won't be life-threatening. I suffered more dangerous injuries from the Old Poison's 'Toad Stance'. Fortunately it seems like he did not use all of his strength, so it looks like I can be

healed. Only I will have to make you suffer for seven days and seven nights.”

Huang Rong sighed. “You know that even if I had to suffer seventy years for you, I would still be willing,” she said.

Guo Jing felt a sweetness creep into his heart and at the same time felt dizzy. After waiting for a moment his mind cleared up a little bit and he said, “It was a pity that when Master was injured I missed several days’ opportunity to treat him. Had it been otherwise, even though the snake venom was fierce, it wouldn’t have been too hard for him to fully recover. He wouldn’t be ... he wouldn’t be disabled like he is today.”

Huang Rong replied, “When we were on that island, even if we could have healed Master’s injury, would the Old Poison and his nephew let us? Please don’t think that way. Just tell me your method and set my mind at ease.”

“First we must find a peaceful and quiet place,” Guo Jing said. “Then, following the Manual’s instructions, we circulate our ‘qi’ together. Each will hold the other’s palm. By using your internal energy you are helping me heal my injury.” At this point he closed his eyes to catch his breath before continuing. “The only difficulty is that for seven whole days and nights our palms cannot be separated even for a second. Your breathing will be closely linked to mine. We can talk to each other, but we definitely can’t have a third person interrupting us by even a half sentence. Also, we must not walk even half a step. If someone else disturbs us, we may ...”

Huang Rong realized this kind of treatment was similar to the meditation for cultivating someone’s martial arts. Before reaching a satisfactory result, one cannot experience any external interruptions. Otherwise, the mind

would be disturbed with bad thoughts or would go out of control. Unavoidably the result would be a fire deviation and not only would the whole energy cultivation be wasted, but at the very least the person could suffer an injury or even die. That is the reason warriors who cultivate internal energy will find a secluded and uninhabited mountain or field, or at least close their doors and not leave, and have a skilled and powerful master or friend protecting them from the sidelines to prevent their training going astray.

She thought, "With this short notice it's difficult to find a peaceful and quiet place and I am the only one who can help him treat his injury. It's impossible to rely on Sha Gu to guard against external disturbances. She could even come and create endless disturbances herself. If only Big Brother Zhou would come back. But even then I don't think he will be able to focus his mind on guarding us for seven days and seven nights. Success won't be guaranteed and more than likely, things will go wrong. What should I do?" She mused over this matter for a long time. Then she glanced over at the iron bowl in the cabinet. An idea came into her mind, "I've got it. We can hide inside the secret room. In the past Mei Chaofeng practiced martial arts without anybody protecting her. Didn't she hide herself in a cave?"

It was now dawn. Sha Gu went to the kitchen and cooked some rice porridge for the two to eat. "Jing ge ge," Huang Rong said. "Wait here for a moment. I am going to buy some food and then we can start your treatment immediately."

She thought that with the weather being blisteringly hot, if she cooked some rice and dishes, they would definitely spoil if kept in the room for seven days and nights. She went to the village market to buy a picul [approximately 50 kg or 100 lbs] of watermelons.

The farmer who sold the watermelons brought everything back to Sha Gu's inn and stacked them on the floor. On the way out after being paid he said, "Our Ox Village's watermelons are sweet and crispy. Once Miss tastes them, you will agree with me."

On hearing the words 'Ox Village' [niu jia cun], Huang Rong's heart skipped a beat. "So it turns out this is Ox Village," she said to herself. "This is Jing ge ge's hometown." She was afraid that if Guo Jing found out his mind would be disturbed and therefore, she replied noncommittally.

She waited until the villager went out before going to the hidden chamber. Guo Jing was asleep and blood no longer seeped out through the cotton cloth wrapped around his waist. Huang Rong opened the cabinet, turned the iron bowl to open the secret chamber's door, and took the watermelons inside one by one. Then only one thing remained outside...Sha Gu. Huang Rong had repeatedly warned Sha Gu not to tell anybody that they would be staying inside the chamber. No matter what kind of earth shattering things happened, she was not supposed to call out from outside.

Sha Gu did not understand her intentions, but seeing Huang Rong's serious expression, she said she understood and repeatedly nodded her head. "You want to eat watermelons inside and you don't want anybody to know. After you finish eating watermelons, you will come back out again. Sha Gu will not tell."

Huang Rong was happy. "If Sha Gu doesn't tell, Sha Gu is a good girl," she said. "If Sha Gu tells, Sha Gu is a bad girl."

"Sha Gu won't tell...Sha Gu is a good girl," Sha Gu said repeatedly.

Huang Rong fed Guo Jing another big bowl of rice porridge and ate one herself. Then she helped him enter the secret chamber. As she was closing the door from the inside, she saw Sha Gu's simple face showing a smile. Sha Gu said, "Sha Gu won't tell."

Suddenly Huang Rong's heart fluttered. "This girl is so dumb and what if every time she meet someone she says, 'Those two eat watermelons inside the cabinet, but Sha Gu won't tell?' The only way to ensure our safety is to kill her."

She grew up under the influence of her father. Benevolence and justice, the differences between good and evil didn't matter to them. Although she knew that Sha Gu had a very close relationship with Qu Lingfeng, right at that moment she presented a danger to Guo Jing's life. Even if there were a dozen Sha Gus, she would kill them all.

She took the dagger from Guo Jing's waist and walked out of the room.

**End of Chapter 23.**



## Chapter 24 - Healing in the Secret Room

Translated by Frans Soetomo



*Sha Gu walked over to Liang Ziwen and said, "You hit my nose, I must hit your nose. You hit me once; I must pay you back three times." Her fist went straight to his nose.*

Huang Rong had walked two steps before she turned her head and saw Guo Jing's suspicious expression, as if he could see the murderous look on her face. She thought, "I don't have a problem with killing Sha Gu, but Jing ge ge might ask me about it later. He might not ask me now, he might not even raise this matter...ever, but in his heart he might harbor hatred towards me and that won't be good. All right, we'll just have to take this huge risk." She closed the door immediately and then looked around the room carefully.

In the western corner, near the roof of that small room, there was a small ventilation window about one foot square where the sunlight entered the room through a sheet of clamshell curtain. It was by this light that they were able to see everything inside the room. The ventilation hole was dusty, so Huang Rong took out her dagger and cleaned it out. The bad smell in the room still lingered, but they did not seem to notice it. In light of the life and death experiences they'd faced earlier, the smelly, dusty room felt like a sanctuary to them.

Guo Jing leaned against the wall, smiled slightly and said, "There is no better place for us to treat my injury than in this room. Unfortunately we are accompanied by two dead people. Are you afraid?"

Inside, Huang Rong was actually frightened, but she was determined not to think about it. She said with a smile, "One was my older Martial Brother [shige], he certainly won't harm me, and the other was a rice bucket government official. Alive he wouldn't scare me and by becoming a ghost he would scare me even less." She immediately kicked the pair of skeletons towards the northern corner of the room. She took the straw mat covering the watermelons, spread it out on the floor, and

then she piled the watermelons around it within arm's reach. "What do you think?" she asked.

"Very good," Guo Jing replied. "Now we can start."

Huang Rong helped him sit down on the straw mat and she sat cross-legged to his left. When she raised her head she saw a small peep-hole the size of a coin in the wall right in front of her. She looked through it and to her delight she saw a mirror in which she could see the entire room outside. Apparently the people who built this secret room had planned it well. When they were hiding from enemies inside this room, they could still observe the activities outside in the mirror. It had been unused for a long time and the mirror was covered with a thick layer of dust. She took out a handkerchief, wrapped it around her index finger, and poked it through the hole to clean the mirror. She saw Sha Gu sitting on the floor throwing pebbles while humming a tune. Huang Rong could not hear clearly what she was humming, so she pressed her ear to the hole to listen. It seemed Sha Gu was humming a lullaby: "Swing, swing, swing; swing to the Grandmother's bridge. Grandmother calls me the precious baby ..."

It was strange, but the more she listened, the more she felt the touching emotions that song carried. Her heart overflowed with tender affection. She could not help but wonder: "Could this song be the one her mother sang to her when she was little ...? If my mother had not died, would she have sung to me like this?" Thinking of this, her eyes became moist.

Guo Jing saw her sad expression and said, "What are you thinking? My injury is not that bad...don't feel so sad."

Huang Rong moved her hand to wipe away tears and said, "Quickly teach me the internal energy cultivation

technique.” Thereupon Guo Jing started to slowly recite the ‘Treating Injuries’ chapter from the ‘Nine Yin Manual’.

There was a saying amongst martial arts practitioners: ‘Learn how to take a beating first before learning how to beat someone.’ Therefore, the most basic lesson in martial arts was how to take a beating without getting seriously injured. When the martial arts became more profound, the practitioner must learn how to protect their own body and their life by sealing acupoints to treat an injury, set broken bones, cure poison, treat wounds, and many other kinds of advanced techniques. Better techniques would result in better skills and it did not matter if one’s martial arts skills were unmatched, there would come a day when he would fall. The ‘Treating Injuries’ portion of the ‘Nine Yin Manual’ explained how a highly skilled martial artist could use his own internal energy to treat an injury and how to circulate his own and other’s internal energy for treating internal injuries. As for broken bones, weapon-inflicted wounds or other external injury treatments, it was assumed that the person who practiced the ‘Manual’ did not need further instructions.

Huang Rong needed to listen to something once and she would remember forever. There were several unclear passages in the ‘Manual’, which they needed to discuss in detail. One had a strong foundation in the Quanzhen Sect’s internal energy cultivation and the other had extraordinary intelligence. With some deliberation, they were able to grasp almost everything. Huang Rong held out her right hand, clasped Guo Jing’s left, and they started to train diligently according to the techniques in the ‘Manual’.

After training for four hours they took a short break. Taking her knife in her left hand, Huang Rong cut up a watermelon. She fed some to Guo Jing, while her right hand still clasped Guo Jing’s left. After training for several hours,

the tightness in Guo Jing's chest gradually decreased as the warm energy from Huang Rong's palm slowly dispersed into his bones. The pain in his side also gradually reduced. He thought the techniques contained in the manual were truly incomparable. He did not dare to be negligent and proceeded with care.

When the time came for them to take their third break, the light streaming through the ventilation window had gradually dimmed. It was near dusk. Not only did Guo Jing feel that his chest was a lot less constricted, but Huang Rong also felt invigorated. The two chatted a while before continuing their training. Suddenly they heard running footsteps that stopped in front of the inn. Then several people came in. An insolent voice shouted, "Quickly get some food. Your masters here are starving!"

They recognized that the voice belonged to the 'Three-Headed Dragon' Hou Tonghai. Guo Jing and Huang Rong looked at each other in surprise. Huang Rong quickly looked through the small hole and to her surprise, she saw in the mirror not only Hou Tonghai, but Wanyan Honglie, Ouyang Feng, Yang Kang, Peng Lianhu and the others. Huang Rong had no idea where Sha Gu had gone to play.

Hou Tonghai slapped the table and made quite a racket but nobody came. Liang Ziweng went out and walked around the building. He frowned and said, "Nobody lives here." Hou Tonghai volunteered to go into the village and buy some wine and food. Ouyang Feng found a spot protected from the blowing wind and spread some straw. Then he carried his nephew and gently placed him on the straw to let him lie quietly to heal his broken legs.

Peng Lianhu said with a laugh, "Although those palace guards are useless, they are haunting us like ghosts. We didn't even have time to stop and eat for the whole day.

Prince, you are a northerner, yet you knew that there is a desolate village by the Qiantang River and led us here. Truly nothing is hidden from your knowledgeable mind."

Although he heard the flattering tone in Peng Lianhu's voice, Wanyan Honglie's face did not show the slightest satisfaction. He merely sighed softly and said, "I came to this place nineteen years ago." Everyone could see that his expression had changed. They felt a little strange. Of course, nobody knew he was thinking about how Bao Xirou had saved his life in this village. The desolate village still existed, but that gentle lady with a hairpin in her hair, wearing green robes, and who fed him warm chicken soup, was no longer in this world.

Meanwhile, Hou Tonghai had returned from the village with wine and food. Peng Lianhu poured wine for everybody and said to Wanyan Honglie, "Prince, today you succeeded in attaining the marvelous book of military strategy. It is a sign that the Great Jin's prestige will soon inspire the world, and your armies will dominate tens of thousands of lands. Let us all congratulate you!" He raised his cup and gulped his wine. His voice was loud and clear so Guo Jing could hear him clearly in spite of the wall between them. He was shocked. "Master Yue's Legacy [Yue Yeye] has fallen into his hands!" he thought bitterly. As soon as his mind became anxious, the flow of energy in his chest reversed. Huang Rong could feel his palm shaking and she knew he'd heard everything. It had affected his 'dan tian' [pubic region] energy. If it was not controlled quickly his life might be in danger. She quickly pressed her lips to his ear and whispered, "If he could steal the book, can't we do the same? When your Second Master [Er Shifu], the 'Magical Hands Scholar' makes his move, he can easily steal ten books."

Guo Jing thought she was right and immediately closed his eyes. His mind no longer listened to the conversation beyond the wall. Huang Rong looked into the hole again and saw Wanyan Honglie raise his cup and drink his wine. Then, with a delighted smile, he said, "In today's battle everyone worked hard to help and Mr. Ouyang rendered the greatest service. If he had not gotten rid of that kid named Guo, we would have had to expend a lot more effort."

Ouyang Feng let out a dry laugh which sounded like a broken cymbal. As Guo Jing heard his laughter, his heart was stirred yet again. Huang Rong inwardly thought, "Heaven bless us and not let the Old Poison pluck his devilish zither here, or Jing ge ge's life will be difficult to save."

She heard Ouyang Feng say, "This place is so remote, the Song army will not find us here. I wonder what kind of treasure this Yue Fei Yishu [Legacy] is. Let us all take a look."

He took the stone box from his clothing and placed it on the table. His thoughts were that should Wumu Legacy contain an exquisite martial arts method, then he would, without regard for anyone else, take it for himself. However, if the book only contained marching techniques and military strategies, it would be useless to him. In that case, he would gladly let the others enjoy it and allow Wanyan Honglie keep it.

In the meantime, everyone was gazing at the stone box. Huang Rong thought, "What can I do to destroy the book? Destroying it would be better than letting it fall into the hands of these traitors." She heard Wanyan Honglie say, "Xiao Wang [lit. little prince] has performed a comprehensive analysis of Yue Fei's riddle in the form of a



poem. I also carefully studied the official historical records of the previous dynasties on the construction of the Imperial Palace. I came to believe that this book was concealed fifteen steps east of the 'Green-Jade Cold Hall'. Today my deduction was proved correct. I believe no one in the Song Dynasty knew that such a treasure was hidden in their palace. The commotion we made last night....I don't think anybody knew what it was all about." He sounded very proud of himself. Everyone seized the opportunity to immediately heap praises on him.

Wanyan Honglie twisted his moustache and laughed. "Kang'er," he said, "Go ahead...open the box."

Yang Kang responded and stepped forward. First he removed the seal and then lifted the lid. Everyone's eyes were on the box. Their countenances suddenly changed and they were confounded. No one made a sound. The box was completely empty. There wasn't a military strategy book inside ...there wasn't even a blank sheet of paper. Although Huang Rong could not see the box, judging from everyone's expression, she could deduce that the box was empty. She was delighted and found it amusing.

Wanyan Honglie was very disappointed. He held onto the table as he sat down. His hand propped his cheek as he began thinking deeply. "My thousands of calculations, tens of thousands of iterations, all pointed to Yue Fei's Legacy being in this box. How can it be that there's not even a trace of it?" he thought. Suddenly he had an idea and his face lit up. He took the stone box outside towards the well and smashed it with all his might against the flagstones. 'Bang!' the box broke into pieces.

When Huang Rong heard that breaking stone she immediately thought, "Ah, there is a secret compartment in the box." She was anxious to see if the Legacy was inside a

secret compartment, but no matter what, she could not go out. After a moment, however, she saw Wanyan Honglie dejectedly return to the room and sit down.

"I knew there was a secret compartment in that box, but who could have known it was also empty," Wanyan Honglie said.

One after another the others tried to offer their opinions. Huang Rong was amused listening to their wild imaginings. Each was weirder than the next. She immediately told Guo Jing. When he learned that the Wumu Legacy had not been stolen, he was greatly comforted. Huang Rong deliberated further. "These traitors will not give up just like that...they must be thinking of going back to the palace tonight." She was thinking of her Master who was still inside the palace and she was afraid he might be implicated if found. Zhou Botong was there to protect him, but Huang Rong could not help but feel worried since the Old Urchin behaved like a madman. He could not take care of important matters properly.

Sure enough, she heard Ouyang Feng say, "It's not a big deal. We'll go back to the palace tonight and search some more."

"We can't go tonight," Wanyan Honglie objected. "We made quite a disturbance last night and I am sure they will guard the palace closely tonight."

"We can't avoid the guards," Ouyang Feng said, "But why worry over it? The Prince and Young Prince do not need to go. You and my nephew may stay here to have some rest."

Wanyan Honglie cupped his fists in front of his chest. "Then I will trouble Mister to do this work for me. The Prince will await your good news with a peaceful heart." Straightaway everyone spread out some straw in the room and lay down

to sleep. After they'd slept for more than two hours, Ouyang Feng woke the others and they went to the city once again.

Wanyan Honglie tossed and turned without being able to get any sleep. Around midnight he could hear the sounds of the rising tide in the river. He could also hear a dog barking at the other end of the village and the dog barked intermittently throughout the night, as if it was lamenting. In the quiet of the night it brought sorrow to the heart, adding to the anxiety he already felt inside.

After a long while footsteps were heard outside the door... someone was coming in. Wanyan Honglie quickly sat up and drew his sword. Yang Kang had quickly jumped behind the door to set an ambush. In the moonlight they saw a woman with disheveled hair, humming a children's song, open the door and come in. It was none other than Sha Gu. She had just got back from playing in the woods all day. She thought little of seeing people sleeping in her room, so she kept walking towards the pile of firewood, and lay down next to it. Not too long afterwards, she was snoring.

When Yang Kang saw it was only a dumb country girl, he smiled and went back to sleep. Wanyan Honglie's mind, however, was filled with thoughts of the past and present. He did not sleep for a long time. He got up, took a candle from his backpack and lit it. Then he took out a book and started flipping the pages.

Huang Rong saw the bright light through the small hole. She took a peek and saw a moth circle the candle, then fly suddenly into the flame. Its wings were immediately scorched and it fell onto the table. Wanyan Honglie picked the moth up. He could not help but feel distressed. He thought, "If my Madame Bao were here, she would certainly take care of you." From his bosom he took out a

small silver knife, a small medicine bottle and stroked them affectionately.

Huang Rong lightly tapped Guo Jing's shoulder and moved aside so Guo Jing could take a look through the small hole. What Guo Jing saw with his own eyes enraged him. He vaguely recognized the silver knife and medicine bottle as belonging to Yang Kang's mother, Bao Xiruo. He'd seen her using these items at the Zhao Palace when she was tending a little injured rabbit. He heard Wanyan Honglie softly murmur, "Nineteen years ago, in this very village, I met you for the first time ... Ay! I wonder what has happened to your former home?" After saying that he arose, took the candle, and went out of the door.

Guo Jing was startled. "Could it be that this is my parents' hometown, Ox Village?" he wondered. He pressed his mouth to Huang Rong's ear to inquire. Huang Rong nodded. Guo Jing's blood surged and his body shook.

Huang Rong's right palm was holding Guo Jing's left palm so she realized his breathing was uneven because of his agitation, which was very dangerous. She immediately reached out her left palm to grab Guo Jing's right and together they synchronized their energies while Guo Jing slowly controlled his breathing. After a long time they saw a moving light and heard Wanyan Honglie heave a long sigh as he came back to the room. By this time Guo Jing was able to control his emotions, but his left palm was still held in Huang Rong's right. He looked through the small hole again and saw Wanyan Honglie holding several small pieces of broken brick and tile, sitting in daze in the candle light.

Guo Jing thought, "This traitor is less than ten steps away from me. All I need to do is throw the dagger at him and I will be able to take his life."

His right hand drew the golden blade that Genghis Khan gave him and he whispered to Huang Rong, "Open the door."

"Don't!" Huang Rong hastily said. "Killing him will be easy, but our hiding place will be discovered."

With a trembling voice Guo Jing said, "In six more days, I won't know where he'll be."

Huang Rong knew it would not be easy to persuade him, so she whispered in his ear, "Your mother and Rong'er want you alive."

Guo Jing's felt a cold shiver in his heart. He nodded while putting the golden blade back into its sheath and again looked out through the small hole. He saw Wanyan Honglie sprawled on the table, asleep. Suddenly he saw somebody get up from the straw. This person's face was illuminated by the candle light, but in the mirror, it was not clear whose face it was. Guo Jing only saw him quietly stand up and walk over to Wanyan Honglie. He took the silver knife and the small medicine bottle from the table, looked at them for a while, then gently put them back down on the table. He then turned his head and Guo Jing saw that it was Yang Kang.

Guo Jing said in his heart, "That's right, you must avenge your parents. This is a very good opportunity. With a stab of the dagger, the enemy, with whom you cannot live under the same sky, will certainly lose his life. You won't get the same opportunity once the Old Poison and the others come back."

He was very anxious, hoping Yang Kang would make his move immediately. But after putting down the silver knife and the medicine bottle, Yang Kang blew out the candle. For a moment the room looked dark to him. Then he saw

Yang Kang take off his long robe and gently drape it over Wanyan Honglie's shoulders to protect him from the cold night.

Guo Jing was very angry and turned his head, not willing to look outside any longer. He did not understand how Yang Kang could treat the enemy who killed his parents with such tender and loving care. Huang Rong comforted him by saying, "Do not be impatient. After your injury is healed, even should the traitor run away over the horizon, we will catch him. He is not the Old Poison...don't you think killing him will be easy?" Guo Jing nodded and went back to circulating his internal energy.

Dawn soon arrived and from the village came the sounds of roosters crowing and all kinds of morning clatter. The 'qi' had circulated inside their bodies seven times and they felt relaxed and comfortable. Huang Rong raised her index finger and said with a smile, "One day has passed!"

"And it was very dangerous!" Guo Jing replied in low voice. "If not for you, I would not have been able to keep my mind peaceful and calm. I nearly made things worse."

"There are six more days and nights to go," Huang Rong said. "You promised to listen to what I say."

Guo Jing laughed. "When did I ever not listen to what you say?" he said.

Huang Rong leaned her head to one side and said, "Hmm, let me think."

At this moment a single ray of sunlight came slanting through the ventilation window. Her white skin and beautiful rosy cheeks looked like the red clouds at dawn. Guo Jing suddenly noticed her palm was exceptionally warm and soft. Something stirred in his chest and he hastily

chased that thought away, but his face was already blushing. For as long as they had been together, Guo Jing had never had this kind of feeling towards her before. He could not help feeling shocked and he silently rebuked himself.

Huang Rong saw him blushing and felt strange. "Jing ge," she asked, "What just happened?"

With a low voice Guo Jing replied, "I have been bad. I suddenly thought of ... thought of ..."

"What is it?" Huang Rong asked.

"I am not thinking about it anymore," Guo Jing answered.

"Then what did you think of?" Huang Rong pressed.

Unable to dodge the question Guo Jing confessed. "I was thinking of hugging you...kissing you."

Huang Rong felt warm and sweet all of a sudden and she also blushed. She looked shy and even lovelier.

Seeing her lower her head without saying anything Guo Jing asked, "Rong'er, are you angry? I was as bad as Ouyang Ke for having such a bad thought."

Huang Rong gave him one of her captivating smiles. "I am not angry," she said with a tender voice, "I was thinking that in the future you will hug and kiss me, for I will certainly be your wife." Guo Jing was very happy. He stammered but could not say anything.

"You wanted to hug and kiss me...is that bad?" Huang Rong asked.

Guo Jing was about to reply when there suddenly came the sounds of rushing footsteps outside as two men burst into

the inn. He heard Hou Tonghai's voice say, "His granny [he's cussing], I told you earlier that there are ghosts in the world, but older Martial Brother did not believe me." He was so agitated that he could not say clearly what was in his raging mind. Then Sha Tongtian replied, "What ghost? I told you...we met a martial arts master."

Huang Rong looked out through the hole and saw that Hou Tonghai's face was covered in blood, while Sha Tongtian's clothes were torn to pieces. It seemed as though these two martial brothers had been through an extremely difficult situation.

Wanyan Honglie and Yang Kang were confounded to see their condition and they hastily asked about it. Hou Tonghai replied, "We were very unfortunate...we met a ghost at the Imperial Palace last night. Damn it! Old Hou's ears were cut off by that ghost."

Wanyan Honglie did indeed see that both sides of his face were covered with blood and looked somewhat unusual. As it turned out, his ears were missing. Wanyan Honglie was astonished.

Sha Tongtian scolded, "Still talking about a strange ghost story! Haven't you disgraced us enough?"

Hou Tonghai was afraid of his older Martial Brother, but he still tried to argue. "I saw it clearly. His eyes were blue...he was the red bearded 'Judge of Hell' pouncing at me with a scary 'Wah! Wah!' voice! All I did was turn my head, then he grabbed my neck and my ears were gone. This 'Judge of Hell' looked exactly like the one in the temple...how could it not be him?"

Sha Tongtian only fought the 'Judge' for three stances and his clothes were ripped to pieces. That 'Judge' was definitely a highly skilled martial artist, not some strange



ghost, but Sha Tongtian did not have a clue as to why he had the appearance of the 'Judge of Hell'.

The four people offered their guesses and they even asked Ouyang Ke who was lying down because of his injuries, but nobody came up with a plausible answer.

While they were still talking, Lingzhi Shangren [Shangren is a respectful term for addressing a Buddhist monk], Peng Lianhu and Liang Ziweng also arrived, one after another. Venerable Lingzhi's hands were bound behind his back with an iron chain, Peng Lianhu's cheeks were a swollen red and blue, and Liang Ziweng's condition was the funniest...the white hair on his head had been pulled out so cleanly that he looked like a Buddhist monk. As he stood near and talked to Sha Tongtian, they looked alike with their bald heads reflecting the light.

As it turned out those three had entered the Imperial Palace and spread out in order to find the Wumu Legacy. All of them had met ghosts, but each met a different ghost. One met with a 'wu chang gui' [the ghost supposed to take soul after death], the other 'huang ling guan' [yellow spirit officer], and the last was 'tu di pu sa' [earth god].

Liang Ziweng stroked his own bald head and opened his mouth to curse using all the dirty words he knew, including some like 'mother-in-law of the earth grew some fungi'. Peng Lianhu endured it all silently and did not say a single word as he worked hard trying to take the iron chain from Venerable Lingzhi's wrists. The chain, with hooks on either end, connected tightly to each other and cut deep into the flesh. Peng Lianhu had to exert a lot of strength and his hands were bruised and bloody before he could unhook the chain. Everyone looked at each other with blank dismay and nobody made a sound. They knew in their hearts that last night they had met a highly skilled martial artist and were

greatly insulted. They all felt ashamed. Hou Tonghai still believed it was a ghost and nobody bothered to argue with him.

After a long time Wanyan Honglie opened his mouth. "I wonder why Mr. Ouyang has not come back yet. Perhaps he also met a ghost."

"Mr. Ouyang's martial arts skill is unmatched," Yang Kang said. "Even if he met a ghost he wouldn't suffer a defeat." Peng Lianhu and the others were indifferent.

Huang Rong heard everything about how these people met extremely difficult situations and talked about ghosts. She was very pleased and thought, "The masks I bought for Zhou Dage [Big Brother] have unexpectedly boosted his power and prestige ...that is truly beyond my expectations. I wonder if he's met and fought the Old Poison yet." At that moment she felt Guo Jing's internal energy starting to flow into her palm, so she immediately turned back to join him.

Peng Lianhu and the others had been busy all night and were starving. Working together they chopped firewood, bought rice and vegetables, and prepared the food. When the food was ready, Hou Tonghai went to the cupboard to get some bowls. He noticed the iron bowl and tried to take it...naturally it would not budge. He was startled and shouted, "A ghost!" He pulled the bowl with all his strength, but of course the bowl did not move. Huang Rong heard his voice and was shocked, for she knew that their hiding place must not be found by them. Not only that, if a fight broke out they would not necessarily win and besides, if they moved ever so slightly, Guo Jing's life would be in danger. That must not happen. Inside the secret room she was frightened and did not know what to do. Outside of the room, Sha Tongtian heard his martial brother's shout and reprimanded him for making such a big fuss over nothing.

Hou Tonghai was not angry and said, "All right then, come and take this bowl." Sha Tongtian reached out his hand to pick up the bowl, but the bowl stayed put. "Ah!" he exclaimed.

Peng Lianhu heard him and came over. "Brother Sha [Sha Xiong]," he said, "There must be a secret mechanism connected to it. Try turning it to the left or right."

Huang Rong knew the situation was pressing and knew that they were being forced to risk it all. She handed the dagger to Guo Jing and reached out her hand to take the bamboo stick given to her by Hong Qigong. Inwardly she felt sad to think their lives would end this way. At the last moment she turned her head and noted the skeletons at the corner of the room. Suddenly an idea came to mind. She hurriedly grabbed the skulls, lifted a big watermelon, and placed the skulls on the watermelon.

With a creaking sound the iron door opened, revealing the hole behind it. Huang Rong placed the watermelon on top of her head and spread her long hair over her face. As Sha Tongtian opened the door, he saw a monster with two heads inside the cabinet, making scary 'Wah! Wah!' sounds. The monster's two heads were skulls, side by side on top of a blue and green striped sphere, with a clump of long black beard beneath it.

Everyone had suffered a lot the previous night and they were still shaken. Now they suddenly saw a ghost inside the cabinet and they were really frightened. Hou Tonghai screamed and ran away. Without thinking, everyone else followed. The only one left was Ouyang Ke. He was lying on a straw bed with broken legs, unable to run.

Huang Rong heaved a long sigh and quickly closed the cabinet door. She could not help but smile considering that,

for the moment, they had barely escaped serious trouble. She also knew those traitors were some of Jianghu's top veterans, so surely they would come back. They were running away because they had been frightened by the Old Urchin. If not for that, how could she have fooled them so easily? Once they calmed down they would come back and not be frightened away so easily. She was still undecided on the next course of action.

Huang Rong's grin had not disappeared before she heard a noise at the inn's door...someone was coming. Huang Rong grabbed a steel Emei Sting tightly in her hand and kept the bamboo stick close by her side. As soon as the cabinet door was opened, she would throw the projectile first and think about her actions later. After waiting for a moment she heard a beautiful voice calling out, "Innkeeper... Innkeeper!"

Huang Rong was really surprised to hear this call. She quickly looked out through the small hole and saw a lady wearing an embroidered gown sitting down. Her clothes and adornments were gorgeous, indicating that she came from a wealthy family. She sat with her back facing the mirror, so Huang Rong could not see her face.

The lady waited for quite a while and then she called out again, "Innkeeper...Innkeeper!"

Huang Rong thought, "That voice sounds familiar...tender yet strong. In fact she sounds like the Eldest Miss Cheng [Cheng Da Xiaojie] from Baoying." At that moment the lady turned around and it was Miss Cheng. Huang Rong was pleasantly surprised. "Why would she come this place?"

Sha Gu had not been awakened by the commotion made by Hou Tonghai and the others, but by now she'd had enough sleep, so she crawled up from her straw bed.

“Innkeeper,” Miss Cheng said. “Would you please prepare some food for me? I would be much obliged.”

Sha Gu shook her head, indicating she did not have any food. Suddenly she sniffed and smelled cooked rice. She rushed over to lift the pot’s lid and saw it was full of plain white rice that Peng Lianhu and the others had prepared. Sha Gu was delighted and, without wondering where the food came from, she filled two bowls, gave one to Miss Cheng while she gobbled the other. Miss Cheng noted there was no other food, only plain rice. She ate a few bites, and then put the bowl down. Sha Gu quickly ate three full bowls, then she patted her belly, looking very satisfied.

“Miss,” Miss Cheng said. “May I ask you a question? Do you know how far Ox Village is from this place?”

“Ox Village?” Sha Gu said. “This is Ox Village. How far it is from this place, I don’t know.”

Miss Cheng blushed. She lowered her head and played with the end of her belt. After some time she said, “So it turns out that this is Ox Village. Then I wonder if you know someone. I wonder if you know... know...someone ...”

Sha Gu did not wait for her to finish. She just shook her head impatiently and then rushed out of the door. Huang Rong wondered, “Who is she looking for in Ox Village? Ah, that’s right! She is the disciple of Sun Bu’Er. Most likely she received an order from her Master and Martial Uncles to find Qiu Chuji’s disciple, Yang Kang.”

Huang Rong saw Miss Cheng sitting up straight, her clothes properly arranged and she gently stroked the pearl head ornament at her temple. Her face was flushed and she had a slight smile at the corner of her lips. Huang Rong did not know what she was thinking and found this interesting. She suddenly heard footsteps as someone came in from outside.

This person was tall, handsome and his steps were brisk. As soon as he came in, he also called out for the innkeeper. Huang Rong thought, "By what coincidence would people I know gather together in this 'Cow' Village? The feng shui [harmonious balance - lit. wind and water] of Jing ge ge's Ox Village must be very good...if not for wealth, then for the individual." As it turned out, the incoming person was the Young Master of Cloud Manor, Lu Guanying. When he saw Miss Cheng he was startled. Then he called again, "Innkeeper!"

When Miss Cheng saw this young man, she felt shy and hurriedly turned away. Lu Guanying also felt awkward. "How come there's a beautiful young girl sitting alone in this place?" he thought. He walked around the kitchen and did not see anyone else. He was very hungry and saw there was rice in the pot. He turned to Miss Cheng and said, "Xiao Ren [lit. little/ - he's referring to himself] is very hungry, could Miss please give me a bowl to eat."

Miss Cheng hung her head lower, smiled slightly, and said, "The rice is not mine. Xiang Gong [honorable master], please help yourself."

Lu Guanying ate two full bowls, then cupped his fists to express his gratitude. He said, "This lowly person wishes to ask Miss about a certain place. I wonder how far Ox Village is from here?"

Miss Cheng and Huang Rong were both delighted. "Ha, it turns out he is also looking for Ox Village," they both thought. Miss Cheng stood up to return his respects and said, "This is Ox Village."

Lu Guanying was delighted. "That's wonderful!" he said, "This lowly person also wonders if Miss knows a certain man."

Miss Cheng was about to say that she was not a local when she suddenly changed her mind. "I wonder who he is looking for?" she thought.

Lu Guanying said, "I am looking for a gentleman surnamed Guo, Master Guo Jing. I was wondering where he lives... Is he home right now?"

Both Miss Cheng and Huang Rong were startled. "Why is he looking for him?"

Miss Cheng was dumbstruck. She hung her head and blushed to her ears. Looking at her expression, Huang Rong, with eighty percent certainty, guessed, "It seems this Miss secretly fell in love with Jing ge ge because he saved her in Baoying." Because Huang Rong was still very young, was an open-minded person, and believed in her heart that Guo Jing would not disagree with her reasoning, her heart, therefore, was free from jealousy. In fact, she was delighted to find that others liked Guo Jing as well.

Huang Rong's speculation was right on target. When Miss Cheng was held captive by Ouyang Ke, it was true that it was the Beggar Clan's Li Sheng and his men who tried to help her, but they were not Ouyang Ke's match. If Guo Jing and Huang Rong had not gone into action, she would have suffered a disgrace. She'd noticed Guo Jing was young, his skill superb, and his manner, sincere. Unexpectedly a strand of love thread floated from her to stick on Guo Jing.

She was the young lady of a very rich family and had never been away from home before. She had reached the age where she started to have an interest in the opposite sex, so when she met an attractive young man, Guo Jing, she unexpectedly fell in love. Even after Guo Jing left, he was always in Miss Cheng's mind. She thought it over from many sides and mustered up enough courage to leave home

in the middle of the night. Though she was a martial artist, she had never left home before and did not have the slightest idea about the ways of Jianghu people. She happened to hear that Guo Jing was from Ox Village in Lin'an prefecture, and thereupon found her way there.

Because her appearance was elegant and her bearing noble, bad people did not dare to bully her along the way. At the previous village she was told that Ox Village was near and when she suddenly heard Sha Gu say that this was Ox Village, she had no idea what to do next. She had come thousands of li to find Guo Jing...and now she was hoping Guo Jing would not be home. Her thoughts were, "I will secretly go to his home in the evening, take one look at him, and then go home. I can't let him know I came to find him... I would die of embarrassment if he found out."

Now, at this moment, Lu Guanying arrived and inquired about Guo Jing. Miss Cheng was afraid he had found out her heart's desire. She was at a loss for a moment, and then decided she would stand up and leave. Suddenly, outside the door, an ugly face appeared then vanished. Miss Cheng was startled and drew back two steps. That ugly face reappeared and called out, "Two-headed ghost! Come out in the sun if you have the ability. Three-Headed Dragon [San Tou Jiao] Master Hou challenges you to fight. I have one more head [referring to his Three-Headed Dragon nickname] than you do. In the bright sun, Master Hou does not fear you!" His meaning was clear: when it was dark, Master Hou would candidly admit defeat even though he had more heads. Lu and Cheng obviously did not understand.

"Humph!" Huang Rong snorted. "So they finally came back," she murmured. She believed Lu's and Cheng's martial arts skills were not too high and it would be difficult for them to fight Peng Lianhu and the others. If she and



Guo Jing wanted to help, all they would be doing is delivering two more lives. The best way would be to tell them to get out of the way quickly. But how could she let them know? She went over other possibilities, but after thinking it over, she still could not produce any really good ideas. All they had was each other and their courage.

When Peng Lianhu and the others saw the double-headed ghost, they all thought it was the same expert, dressed as a ghost, who had humiliated them the previous night. Therefore, they all ran from the village as far as possible. No one dared to come back, with the exception of Hou Tonghai. He was a simple man and actually believed it was a real ghost. He felt the blazing sun on his head, burning his scalp. While everybody else had disappeared, he cursed, "Ghosts will meet their doom under the sun. They know that, yet they dare to roam Jianghu. I, Lao Hou [Old Hou], am not afraid and I'm going back to face the ghost. Let them respect me." Thereupon he came back to the inn with big strides, albeit with some trepidation in his heart. When he stuck his head in the door he saw Miss Cheng and Lu Guanying sitting in the middle of the room. "Not good!" he said to himself, "The double-headed ghost has transformed itself into a man and a woman. Old Hou, oh, Old Hou, you have to be very careful."

Lu Guanying and Miss Cheng heard his challenge, but they did not understand the reason. They looked at each other and decided he was a mad man; hence they ignored him. Hou Tonghai kept cursing, but the ghost did not come out to fight. He believed that the ghost was afraid of the sun. As for barging in and capturing the ghost, Old Hou did not have the nerve. They were in a stalemate for quite a while. He was waiting for the two ghosts to transform themselves into other forms, but who would have thought that the ghosts did not show any signs of activity at all. Suddenly he

remembered an old saying that ghosts were afraid of filthy things, so he left at once to find some dung.

There were several outhouses in the village and there was one big one next to the inn. In his efforts to capture the ghost he was not afraid of filth, so he took off his outer garment, scooped up a large bundle of dung, and returned to the inn. He saw Lu and Cheng still sitting in the inn. The secret weapon in his hands boosted his courage considerably. He called out loudly, "All right, daring ghost! Master Hou wants you to return to your original form." With his three-pronged fork in his left hand and the bundle of dung in his right hand, he boldly entered the room.

As Lu and Cheng watched this lunatic coming back, they were slightly startled. Even before the man arrived they had already noticed the bad smell he was bringing. Hou Tonghai pondered, "I've heard people say that men are more vicious than women, but the female ghost is more dangerous than the male." Therefore, he lifted the bundle and threw it towards Miss Cheng.

Miss Cheng called out in alarm and moved sideways to evade it. Lu Guanying had already lifted a bench to strike the bundle aside. It fell to the floor and broke open. Dung flew everywhere and a terrible smell attacked their nostrils making them want to throw up.

Hou Tonghai shouted loudly, "Double-headed ghost, quickly go back to your original form." Lifting his fork he attacked Miss Cheng ferociously. He was simple-minded, but his martial arts skills were not bad. His fork attack was both swift and fierce.

Lu and Cheng were alarmed and both thought, "This man is obviously a Wulin expert and he is by no means a lunatic."

Lu Guanying saw Miss Cheng as a lady from a renowned family and she looked so frail and tender that a whiff of wind might blow her away. He was afraid this mad man might hurt her, so he lifted the long bench to parry the three-pronged steel fork. "Who are you, Sir?" he asked. Hou Tonghai ignored his question and jabbed at him with his fork three times. Lu Guanying kept using the bench as his weapon and repeatedly asked his name.

Hou Tonghai noticed that although the ghost's martial arts skill was not weak, it was entirely different from that of the mysterious appearing and disappearing ghost of last night. He concluded it was the result of his dung attack earlier. He was very smug and called out, "You, the enchanting ghost, want to know my name so that you can put a curse on me, don't you? Your master won't fall for your trick."

Initially he'd called himself 'Master Hou', but now that he had this sudden inspiration, he omitted the word 'Hou' and only used the word 'Master' to avoid the ghost's throwing a curse on him. The steel rings on his fork made a ding-dong sound as he intensified his attack.

Lu Guanying's martial arts were inferior to his opponent's to begin with and he was using a bench as a weapon. He wanted to draw the saber from his waist but did not have the chance to do so. He was forced to step back so that after a while his back was against the wall, covering the small hole through which Huang Rong was looking.

Hou Tonghai stabbed with his steel fork and Lu Guanying hastily moved sideways to evade it. 'Bang!' the fork punctured the wall less than a foot away from Huang Rong's peep-hole. Before he'd pulled his fork back, the bench in Lu Guanying's hand struck towards the top of his head. Hou Tonghai's foot flew out to kick Lu Guanying's hand, while his left fist attacked Lu Guanying's face. The

bench fell from Lu Guanying's hands as he was forced to duck to avoid the blow. Meanwhile Hou Tonghai had withdrawn his steel fork from the wall.

Miss Cheng saw this critical situation and she jumped forward, pulled the saber from Lu Guanying's waist, and handed it to him. "Many thanks!" Lu Guanying said. He had never imagined that, at this critical moment, this polite and charming girl would have the courage to enter such a fierce battle and draw his saber to help him. As he saw the bright flickering light from the steel fork coming towards him, his saber immediately went up horizontally in front of his chest and 'clang!' sparks flew everywhere. The steel fork was forced sideways, but he felt a pain in his chest. It seemed that this lunatic's strength was not insignificant, but with a saber in his hand, he was greatly encouraged.

After exchanging several stances, both men's feet had stepped into the dung and spread it everywhere they stepped. In the beginning, Hou Tonghai was fighting with some trepidation and he'd thought about darting out of the door to escape. He did not dare to use all of his strength, but the longer they fought, he began to see that the ghost was unable to defeat him. Obviously his enchantment powers were restrained by the dung. He became bolder and his attacks became fiercer. In the end Lu Guanying was having a hard time blocking his attacks.

At first Miss Cheng was repulsed by the dung on the floor and she stood in a corner watching the fight. Then she saw that this handsome young man would lose his life to the lunatic's steel fork. She hesitated for a moment, finally made up her mind, and drew a sword from her bundle. She called out to Lu Guanying, "Honorable elder brother [Xiong Gong], I ... I am going to help you. Please forgive me." Her manners were so ingrained that she was apologizing before

helping someone to fight. Her sword flashed towards Hou Tonghai's chest.

She was the Sage of Tranquility [Qingjing Sanren], Sun Bu'Er's disciple, so naturally she was well-versed in the Quanzhen Sect's sword techniques. Hou Tonghai had anticipated her move. He thought that the double-headed ghost had transformed itself into two and that the female ghost would attack him soon as an evil spirit, so he was not surprised. But Lu Guanying was pleasantly surprised. He saw that her movements were quick and her sword technique exquisite. His heart was full of admiration. His own saber was starting to become erratic and he was sweating profusely, but now someone suddenly came to help him and his spirits rose.

At first Hou Tonghai was quite worried by the female ghost's fierceness. But after a few stances he noticed that although her sword technique was proficient, her strength was ordinary. Moreover, she looked nervous. Probably she had not been a ghost for long and had not reached the 'old ghost' level yet. He gradually felt more relieved. His three-pronged fork created strong gusts of wind. One against two and he was still able to attack more than his opponents.

Watching from the other room, Huang Rong felt very anxious since she knew Lu and Cheng would eventually fall to their enemy. She wanted to lend them a hand, but she could not leave Guo Jing even half a step. Otherwise, with her intelligence and abundant experience, it would be very easy for her to play tricks on this 'Three-Headed Dragon'.

She heard Lu Guanying call out, "Miss, Go away! You don't have to endanger yourself with him."

Miss Cheng knew he was worried that she might be injured and wanted to fight this mad man alone. She was very

grateful, but she also knew that if he fought alone, he would not be able to resist this enemy. She shook her head, unwilling to withdraw.

As Lu Guanying fought furiously, he shouted to Hou Tonghai, "As a real man you are making things difficult for a young girl...what kind of hero are you? Just deal with me, a man surnamed Lu, and let this Miss go."

Although Hou Tonghai was muddle-headed, he knew by now that these two were not ghosts. But seeing how beautiful Miss Cheng was, and since he had gained the upper hand, how could he let her go? With a laugh he said, "I want to capture the male ghost and I also want to take the female ghost." His steel fork traveled horizontally with a violent thrust. He was being thirty percent lenient towards Miss Cheng, otherwise he would have stabbed her already.

"Miss, go quickly!" Lu Guanying said anxiously, "The man surnamed Lu is grateful for your kindness."

"Honorable master's honored surname is Lu, is it?" Miss Cheng asked in a low voice.

"Precisely," Lu Guanying replied. "Miss, what is your name? What school do you belong to?"

"My Master's surname is Sun. People call her the Sage of Tranquility," Miss Cheng said. "I ... I ..." She was going to say her name, but suddenly felt shy and closed her mouth.

"Miss, I'll block him and you run quickly," Lu Guanying said. "As long as the man surnamed Lu is still alive, I will look for you. I thank you for your help today."

Miss Cheng was blushing as she stammered, "I ... I don't ... honorable elder brother ..." Turning her head to Hou Tonghai she said, "Hey, mad man! Don't you dare injure this

man. My Master is the Sun Zhenren [lit. true person, a respectful term of address for a Taoist priest] from the Quanzhen Sect. She will arrive shortly.”

The names of the Quanzhen Seven Masters were well-known throughout the world. Hou Tonghai had seen it that day with his own eyes when the ‘Immortal with the Iron Foot’ [Tie Jiao Xian], Jade Sun [Yuyang Zi], Wang Chuyi, intimidated the group of experts at the Zhao Palace. Now, hearing Miss Cheng, he was somewhat afraid, but after that slight shock he cursed, “Even if the Quanzhen Seven Masters come together your master here will butcher them all, one by one!”

From outside the door, there suddenly came someone’s clear voice saying, “Who is it in there that’s speaking such nonsense and doesn’t want to live?”

The three were engaged in a fierce battle, but when they heard this voice they all leaped backwards. Lu Guanying was afraid Hou Tonghai would launch a sneak attack so he pulled Miss Cheng behind him and wielded his saber in front of her. Only then he did raise his head to take a look.

He saw a young Taoist priest standing at the doorstep, wearing a feather robe and a star crown. His face was handsome, his eyes bright, and he held a Taoist fly-whisk in his hand. “Who said he wants to butcher the Quanzhen Seven Masters?” he asked coldly.

With the fork in his right hand, his left hand on his hip, Hou Tonghai, with glaring eyes, loudly said, “It was me, your master. So what?”

“All right,” the young priest said, “You’re welcome to try.” Leaning his body forward he swept the whisk toward Hou Tonghai’s face.

Guo Jing had finished one round of exercise by now and hearing the clamor of the battle outside he looked out through the small hole. Huang Rong asked, "Is this young priest also one of the Quanzhen Seven Masters?"

Guo Jing recognized the young priest as Yin Zhiping, Qiu Chuji's disciple. Two years ago he received an order from his master to deliver a letter to the Jiangnan Six Freaks and had a martial arts contest with Guo Jing at night in which Guo Jing was defeated. Guo Jing quietly told Huang Rong everything.

As Huang Rong watched him exchange a few stances with Hou Tonghai, she shook her head and said, "He won't defeat the Three-Headed Dragon."

As Yin Zhiping slightly gave way to Hou Tonghai's attacks, Lu Guanying, saber in hand, immediately stepped forward to help him. Compared to the time he fought Guo Jing that night, he had made some progress, but even fighting side by side with Lu Guanying, they only managed to face Hou Tonghai evenly.

Miss Cheng's left hand had been grabbed by Lu Guanying for only a short moment, yet her heart was still pitter-pattering madly. As the three people fought furiously right next to her, she was actually daydreaming and gently stroking her hand. With a start she was suddenly awakened from her dazed condition by a clanking noise and Lu Guanying's urgent voice, "Miss, watch out!"

Hou Tonghai noticed her condition and thrust his fork at her. Lu Guanying hastily fended off the attack while shouting at her. Miss Cheng's face turned completely red as she gathered her thoughts and re-entered the battle. Miss Cheng's martial arts skill was not very high, but with one against three, Hou Tonghai had a hard time blocking these



enemies. He brandished his fork ferociously, trying to create an opportunity to escape and find some help, but Yin Zhiping's fly-whisk was dancing around in front of his face, blurring his vision. He was negligent for a split second and Lu Guanying's saber slashed his leg.

"Your eighteen ancestors be damned!" Hou Tonghai cursed. But because of this wound he gradually became slower. He thrust the steel fork forward and Yin Zhiping parried with his whisk and the whisk coiled around it. They both pulled their respective weapons back in a tug-of-war. Because Hou Tonghai was stronger, Yin Zhiping was forced to let his whisk go.

Miss Cheng thrust her sword using the 'Fighting and Shaking Star and River' [dou yao xing he] and stabbed his right shoulder. Hou Tonghai could no longer hold his steel fork and it fell. Yin Zhiping took this opportunity to sweep his leg and Hou Tonghai tumbled to the floor. Lu Guanying immediately pounced on him. Taking the leather belt from his waist he bound Hou Tonghai's hands behind his back.

Yin Zhiping laughed and said, "You can't even defeat a Quanzhen Seven Masters' disciple, so how would you butcher the Quanzhen Seven Masters?" Hou Tonghai opened his mouth and shouted curse words, saying that it was three against one and that it was not a real hero's deed. Yin Zhiping tore off a piece of his clothing and stuffed it into his mouth. Hou Tonghai's face looked very angry, but he could not say a thing.

Yin Zhiping bowed to Miss Cheng, "Elder Martial Sister [Shijie] is the disciple of Martial Uncle Sun [Sun Shishu]? Your little brother Yin Zhiping greets you."

Miss Cheng quickly returned his bow and said, "I don't deserve it. I wonder, who Martial Brother's [Shixiong]

Martial Uncle [Shibo] is? Little sister pays my respects to Elder Martial Brother Yin."

"Little brother is a disciple of Eternal Spring [Changchun]," Yin Zhiping replied.

Since becoming an apprentice to her master, Miss Cheng had never left her home. Of the Quanzhen Seven Masters, she had never met six of them. However, her master had told her all about her martial uncles and that Changchun Zi, Elder Martial Uncle Qiu [Qiu Shibo] was the most heroic and possessed the highest martial arts skills. Learning that Yin Zhiping was Qiu Chuji's disciple, she regarded him with respect. Lowering her head she said, "Elder brother is my older martial brother. I am surnamed Cheng. Just call me Younger Martial Sister Cheng."

Yin Zhiping had been under his master's tutelage for quite a long time and he also had inherited his master's broad-minded and heroic disposition. He regarded this martial sister as girlish and shy. She did not look like a heroic person at all, so he was secretly amused. He chatted with her about their school for a while then turned toward Lu Guanying to introduce himself. Lu Guanying introduced himself, but did not mention his father's name or title.

Yin Zhiping turned his attention to Hou Tonghai. "This lunatic's martial arts are actually very good. I wonder where he came from. We must not release him," he said.

Lu Guanying said, "Let little brother use my saber and finish him off." He was the leader of a band of pirates at Lake Tai and killing was not a serious matter for him. Miss Cheng, on the other hand, was tender-hearted. "Ah! Don't kill him!" she said.

Yin Zhiping smiled, "It's all right with me if we don't kill him," he said. "Younger Martial Sister Cheng [Cheng

Shimei], have you been here long?"

Miss Cheng blushed. "Little sister has just arrived," she said.

Yin Zhiping looked at the couple and thought, "Looks like these two are in love with one another...I must not interfere. I'll just visit for a while and then I'll go." He said, "I received an order from Master to go to Ox Village to find someone and convey a message to him. Little brother must take his leave. We'll meet again later." He cupped his hands and turned around to leave.

Miss Cheng's blush had not quite faded and from listening to him it seemed like a tinge of redness crept back onto her face. Hanging her head she asked timidly, "Elder Martial Brother Yin, who are you seeking?"

Yin Zhiping hesitated slightly as he thought, "Younger Martial Sister Cheng is a disciple of my school and this fellow surnamed Lu is her travel companion, so he is not an outsider. I think there is no harm in telling them." Thereupon he said, "I am looking for a friend surnamed Guo."

With these words, the people on both sides of the wall were stunned. Lu Guanying asked, "Could it be that this friend has the single character 'Jing' as his name?"

"That's right," Yin Zhiping said, "Brother Lu also knows this Guo friend?" he asked.

Lu Guanying replied, "The one little brother is looking for is exactly this Martial Uncle Guo [Guo Shishu]."

Yin Zhiping and Miss Cheng were both surprised, "You call him Martial Uncle?"

"My father is of the same generation as he," Lu Guanying said. "That's why Little Brother calls him Shishu." Lu Chengfeng and Huang Rong were of the same generation [meaning that they had the same teacher-Huang Yaoshi] and Guo Jing and Huang Rong were engaged to each other. It was for this reason that Lu Guanying referred to Guo Jing as Martial Uncle.

Miss Cheng did not say anything, but her heart was troubled. Yin Zhiping quickly asked, "Have you seen him? Where is he?"

"Little Brother has just arrived. I was about to inquire about him when this lunatic attacked without any reason," Lu Guanying replied.

"Good!" Yin Zhiping said. "Then let us look for him together." The three went out the door together.

Huang Rong and Guo Jing looked at each other with bitter smiles on their faces. "They will come back," Guo Jing said. "Rong'er, open the door and call them."

Huang Rong sighed and said, "How can I do that? These people are looking for you and it must be about some important matters. You are still trying to heal your injury... how can your attention be diverted?"

"That's right," Guo Jing agreed. "It must be a very important matter. Can you think of something?"

Huang Rong said, "I will not open the door even if the sky is falling"

Sure enough, not too long afterwards, Yin Zhiping and the others came back to the inn. Lu Guanying said, "Even in his hometown no one can shed any light on his whereabouts. This is not good."

Yin Zhiping said, "May we know for what important matter does Brother Lu seek him?"

Initially Lu Guanying was unwilling to say, but seeing Miss Cheng's hopeful look, for some unknown reason he found it hard to refuse. He said, "It is a long story. Let little brother sweep the filth from the floor first, then I will relate the story to you two." There was no broom or dustpan in this inn, so Yin and Lu had to use tree branches to clean up the mess and only then did they sit down to talk.

Lu Guanying was about to speak when Miss Cheng suddenly said, "Wait a minute!" She went to Hou Tonghai and cut two small pieces from her clothing to stop his ears. "We can't let him listen," she said in a low voice.

Lu Guanying praised her, "Miss is very careful. We don't know where this lunatic came from, so we must not let him listen to what we are discussing."

On the other side of the wall Huang Rong silently laughed. "We are eavesdropping in here and it is impossible for you to know about it. Ouyang Ke is lying there inside and listening and nobody notices, yet you still talk about being careful?"

Miss Cheng had not roamed Jianghu before. Yin Zhiping had his master's impetuosity and he was young and inexperienced. Lu Guanying was the leader of Lake Tai's pirates and he was used to giving orders and not used to paying attention to the details. For that reason the three talked about important matters without carefully investigating their surroundings.

As Miss Cheng stooped down, she saw that Hou Tonghai's ears had been cut off. She was only startled for moment before stuffing the pieces of cloth into his ear holes. She smiled slightly and said to Lu Guanying, "Now you can talk."

Lu Guanying reluctantly said, "Ay! I don't know where to start. I am looking for Martial Uncle Guo and reasonably speaking, I should not be looking for him, but I have to."

"This is so strange," Yin Zhiping commented.

"That's true," Lu Guanying continued, "I am looking for Martial Uncle Guo not because of him, but because of his six masters."

Yin Zhiping slapped the table and shouted, "The Six Freaks of Jiangnan?"

"Exactly," Lu Guanying replied.

"Aha!" Yin Zhiping exclaimed. "I think Brother Lu came to this place for the same matter as little Brother. Why don't we write down a name and let Younger Martial Sister Cheng decide whether we are thinking of the same thing or not."

Before Lu Guanying could answer, Miss Cheng was already smiling and said, "That's a good idea. You two turn your backs and write."

Yin Zhiping and Lu Guanying both picked up a twig and wrote something on the floor. Yin Zhiping said with a smile, "Younger Martial Sister Cheng, see if what we wrote is the same or not."

Miss Cheng looked at their writing and in a low voice said, "Elder Martial Brother Yin, your guess was wrong. The two of you did not write the same thing."

"Ah!" Yin Zhiping exclaimed and stood up.

Miss Cheng smiled and said, "While you wrote 'Huang Yaoshi', he actually drew a peach blossom."

Huang Rong was shocked. "Both of them are looking for Jing ge ge in regards to my father?" she thought. She heard Lu Guanying say, "What Brother Yin wrote is the name of the Grandmaster of my school. Little brother does not dare to write down his name."

Yin Zhiping was startled. "Your Grandmaster? Hmm, it seems that what we wrote down is the same after all. Isn't Huang Yaoshi the Master of Peach Blossom Island?"

"Oh! So that's how it is," Miss Cheng said.

Yin Zhiping said, "Since Brother Lu is a Peach Blossom Island disciple, then the reason you are looking for the Six Freaks of Jiangnan is certainly not in their favor."

"That's not true," Lu Guanying said.

Yin Zhiping noticed Lu Guanying spoke with reluctance. He was unhappy as he said, "Since Brother Lu does not regard little brother as a friend, it's useless for us to talk any longer. I'll take my leave now." He stood up and turned around to leave.

Lu Guanying hastily said, "Elder Brother Yin, wait! Little brother has a difficulty and I wish for older brother's help."

Yin Zhiping was overjoyed when others came to him for help so he happily said, "All right, talk with me."

Lu Guanying said, "Elder Brother Yin, you are a disciple of the Quanzhen Sect. If you know someone is in danger, you will certainly warn that person to guard against the danger. That is part of your duty as a chivalrous person. But what if your own superior wanted to harm innocent people...would you still warn those innocent people to guard against your superior?"

Yin Zhiping slapped his thigh and exclaimed, "That's right! I know you are a Peach Blossom Island disciple, so you must have great difficulty with this matter. All right, let us see what I can do."

Lu Guanying said, "In this matter, if little brother does not do anything, I am not doing my duty upholding righteousness. But if I do something, I am betraying my own school. Even though little brother wishes to ask older Martial Brother's help, in all honesty, I cannot open my mouth."

Yin Zhiping had more or less guessed what he wanted, but since he was not willing to say it out loud, Yin Zhiping did not quite know what to do. He lifted his hand to scratch his head and looked bemused.

Miss Cheng remembered something: when a girl was too shy to say her heart's desires, the mother or her sisters would usually ask her questions, and determine what she really wanted by her nodding or shaking her head. Although it was not the best method, it would usually reveal the contents of the girl's heart in the end. For instance the mother would ask, "Child, are you in love with Zhang San'ge [Third Brother surnamed Zhang]?" The girl would shake her head. "Is it Li Silang [Fourth lad of Li family]?" The girl would shake her head again. "Then it must be the Wang family's cousin." The girl would hang her head without saying anything which meant the guess was correct. Thereupon Miss Cheng said to Yin Zhiping, "Elder Martial Brother Yin, you ask big brother Lu questions. If it is correct, he will nod, if wrong, he will shake his head. That way he won't say anything to betray his own school."

Yin Zhiping was delighted. "Little sister...that is a wonderful idea. Brother Lu, let me tell you first about my business. My Master, Changchun Zhenren, happened to hear that the



Master of Peach Blossom Island hates the Six Freaks of Jiangnan to his soul and that he is going to wipe out the entire six families from the face of the earth. My Master immediately set out to Jiaxing to deliver a warning, but the Six Freaks were not at home. They were traveling somewhere. Thereupon my Master visited the six families one by one and told them to escape. When Island Master Huang arrived, he did not find a single person. He was livid and lashed out his anger to the air...then he went north. I don't know what happened afterwards. Do you know of this matter?"

Lu Guanying nodded. Yin Zhiping continued, "I think Island Master Huang is pursuing the Six Freaks to the north. Originally there was some friction between my Master and the Six Freaks, but first, this friction has been taken care of, secondly, my Master greatly admires the Six Freaks' chivalrous deeds in helping others in distress, and finally, my Master thinks this matter is not the Six Freaks' fault at all. It so happened that the Quanzhen Seven Masters were having a meeting in Jiangnan and hence they spread out to find the Six Freaks, to warn them of this danger. It would be best if they could go into hiding in a faraway place so that your Grandmaster won't be able to find them. Don't you agree that we are doing the right thing?"

Lu Guanying repeatedly nodded his head.

Huang Rong was puzzled. "Jing ge ge has already fulfilled his promise to go to Peach Blossom Island. Why would Father still want to settle the debt with the Six Freaks?" She did not know that her father had heard Lingzhi Shangren's lie and believed that his daughter had died at sea. Therefore, grief-stricken, he wanted to vent his anger on the Six Freaks.

She listened as Yin Zhiping continued, "Since he could not find the Six Freaks, my Master then remembered the Six Freaks' disciple, Guo Jing. He is a native of Ox Village in Lin'an prefecture and has most likely returned to his hometown. For that reason my Master sent little brother to find him here. Chances are he would know his six masters' whereabouts. Did you also come to this place regarding this business?"

Lu Guanying again nodded his head. Yin Zhiping said, "Who would have thought that Brother Guo has not come home yet. My Master is very fond of the Six Freaks, but since he could not find them, he did not know what else he could do. But since this is the case, Island Master Huang might not be able to find them either. Brother Lu wanted to ask for my help...does it concern this matter also?"

Lu Guanying nodded. Yin Zhiping said, "Whatever orders Brother Lu might have, please tell me. Little brother will do his best to fulfill your wish."

Lu Guanying did not open his mouth and he looked quite bemused. Miss Cheng said with a smile, "Older Martial Brother Yin, you forget that Young Master Lu [Lu Xiang Gong] cannot open his mouth to speak frankly."

Yin Zhiping smiled, "That's right," he said. "Brother Lu...do you want me to wait for Brother Guo in this place?" Lu Guanying shook his head.

"Do you want little brother to find the Six Freaks and Brother Guo then?" Yin Zhiping asked. Again Lu Guanying shook his head.

"Ah, I get it," Yin Zhiping said. "Brother Lu wants little brother to spread the news in Jianghu. The Six Freaks are natives of Jiangnan. Once the word is out, sooner or later they will hear it."

Lu Guanying again shook his head. Yin Zhiping proposed seven or eight more guesses, but Lu Guanying kept shaking his head. Miss Cheng also asked him two questions, but none of her guesses were correct either. Not only was Yin Zhiping confounded, but Huang Rong in the adjacent room was equally so. The three were in a deadlocked situation for a long time. Finally Yin Zhiping laughed and said, "Little Sister Cheng, you can talk with him...I cannot play this riddle game any longer. I am going out for a walk. I will be back in a couple of hours." With that he went out the door.

Other than Hou Tonghai, Lu and Cheng were left alone. Miss Cheng hung her head and she noticed that Lu Guanying still had not made a move. She stole a glance at him just as Lu Guanying was also looking at her. Their eyes met and both hurriedly glanced away. Miss Cheng blushed even redder than before and hung her head even lower so that her chin touched her chest. Her hands played with the silk tassels at the end of her sword's hilt.

Lu Guanying slowly stood up and walked to the nearby stove above which was a Kitchen God idol. He stood in front of the Kitchen God idol and said, "Kitchen God, this lowly person has a burden in my heart, but I cannot reveal it to anyone else. I am going to bare it all to you, hoping that with your divine power you will bless this matter."

Miss Cheng silently praised him, "A smart man." She raised her head to listen carefully.

Lu Guanying said, "This lowly person is Lu Guanying, the son of Manor Master Lu of Cloud Manor by Lake Tai. My father's name is Chengfeng and he is a disciple of Island Master Huang of Peach Blossom Island. A few days ago my Grandmaster came to the manor and he said he wanted to kill the Six Freaks of Jiangnan and their entire families. He ordered my father and my Older Martial Uncle [Shibo] Mei

Chaofeng to help find the Six Freaks' whereabouts. Older Martial Uncle Mei has a deep enmity with the Six Freaks, so she accepted this order with gladness. Not so my father since he knew the Six Freaks of Jiangnan as patriots and chivalrous heroes. Killing them would not be righteous. Moreover, my father has become friends with the Six Freak's disciple, Younger Martial Uncle Guo and therefore, he could not simply ignore this matter. My father had received an order from my Grandmaster, so he was in a very difficult position. He had a mind to dispatch this lowly person to deliver a warning to the Six Freaks of Jiangnan, telling them to go into hiding and save their lives, but he could not betray his own master. That night my father looked up to the sky, heaved a deep sigh, and softly talked to himself, revealing his concerns. This lowly person was nearby and heard everything. Being a filial person I share my father's sorrow. Eventually my Grandmaster left and this lowly person departed that very same night to try to find the Six Freaks and deliver the warning."

Huang Rong and Miss Cheng both thought, "It turns out he is copying his father's method of telling someone without betraying his school."

They listened to Lu Guanying continue. "The Six Freaks were nowhere to be found, but I remembered their disciple, Younger Martial Uncle Guo, but he is also nowhere to be found. Younger Martial Uncle Guo is my Grandmaster's son-in-law ..."

"Ah!" Miss Cheng could not help but exclaim softly, then hastily covered her mouth with her hand. Originally she was attracted to Guo Jing and thought she was in love with him. She did not realize it was only a young girl's infatuation and not true love. Today she'd met Lu Guanying who looked distinguished, handsome and elegant. In all respects he seemed superior to Guo Jing. When she heard that Guo Jing

was Huang Yaoshi's son-in-law she was shocked, but not at all sad or heartbroken. On the contrary, she felt relieved. She also recalled at Baoying she'd noticed that Guo Jing and Huang Rong were very close to each other. All of a sudden it did not matter to her anymore. Unconsciously, the heart of this young woman had already been taken by somebody else.

Lu Guanying heard her soft exclamation. He wanted to turn around and look at her face, but he forced himself to bear with it. He thought, "If I acknowledge someone is listening from the side, I must stop talking altogether. That day when Father talked to the heavens, he never once looked in my direction. Right now I am talking to the Kitchen God. If she is listening, that means she is eavesdropping and I have nothing to do with it." Thereupon he continued, "I am hoping that when I find Younger Martial Uncle Guo, he and Martial Aunt Huang [Huang Shigu] will beseech the Grandmaster to show mercy. My Grandmaster is hot-tempered, but he loves his daughter and son-in-law, so it is possible that he will not kill his son-in-law's masters. However, from the way my father talked, it sounds as though Younger Martial Uncle Guo and Martial Aunt Huang have encountered some calamities. Whatever they were, it was not convenient for me to ask it of my father."

Listening to this point Huang Rong thought, "Does father know that Jing ge ge is suffering from a serious injury? No, he simply cannot know about it. Most probably he heard that we were stranded on that deserted island."

Meanwhile Lu Guanying continued, "Elder Martial Brother Yin is straightforward and just. Miss Cheng is intelligent and friendly ..."

Listening to him praising her to her face, Miss Cheng was happy and shy at the same time.

“... but what’s in my heart is like a fantasy and they cannot possibly guess it. I am thinking that the Six Freaks of Jiangnan are well-known heroes and real men. Although their martial arts skills are inferior to my Grandmaster, isn’t asking them to run away from danger the same as accusing them of being afraid of death? They certainly will not consider such a cowardly act. I am afraid that if they hear the news, instead of running away, they will go and find the Grandmaster! Therefore, instead of helping them, I would be sending them into a disaster.”

Huang Rong nodded unseen. She thought Lu Guanying was worthy of being the leader of the Lake Tai heroes and he had a profound understanding of the ways of Jianghu people. She heard him continue, “I also think that the Quanzhen Seven Masters are chivalrous people with resounding names and prestige. Their martial art skills are also high. If Elder Martial Brother Yin and Miss Cheng are willing to earnestly ask their masters to be mediators, Grandmaster would most likely give them face. I don’t think there is an irreconcilable deep animosity between Grandmaster and the Six Freaks of Jiangnan. It’s more likely the Six Freaks said or did something that was offensive to the Grandmaster. What they need is a reputable character to act as the mediator, then forgiveness is surely not impossible. Kitchen God, Master, this lowly person’s difficulty is that my idea is in vain since I cannot reveal it to anyone. I am asking you to handle this business for me.” Having finished speaking, he repeatedly bowed to pay his respects to the Kitchen God.

As he finished speaking, Miss Cheng hastily turned around to look for Yin Zhiping, but as she walked to the door she heard Lu Guanying saying something more. “Kitchen God, if the Quanzhen Seven Masters are willing to mediate, they will be performing an enormously good deed. When the

Seven talk to my Grandmaster, I hope that they will be courteous and respectful and not offend my Grandmaster in any way. Otherwise, 'when one wave has not yet subsided, another wave arises'...all efforts will be wasted. This is all I have to say to you."

Miss Cheng smiled and said in her heart, "You have finished talking and now it's my turn to take care of your business." Then she left the inn to look for Yin Zhiping. After going around the village she saw neither his shadow nor his tracks.

She was about to turn around and go back when she suddenly heard Yin Zhiping calling her in a low voice, "Younger Martial Sister Cheng!" He beckoned to her from the corner of a wall.

"Ah! Here you are," Miss Cheng said happily.

Yin Zhiping made a hand signal, telling her to be quiet. He pointed to the west and walked towards her. In a low voice he told her, "There are some suspicious looking people snooping around over there and they all carry weapons."

Miss Cheng's mind was pre-occupied with what Lu Guanying had just said. She said, "I think they are just passers-by."

Yin Zhiping's face actually looked serious and again in a low voice he said, "Those people's movements are agile and their martial arts skills must be very high. We must be very careful." Actually what he saw was Peng Lianhu and the others. They'd waited for Hou Tonghai for a long time and he had not come back. They thought he must be in some danger, but all of them remembered the expert who pretended to be the ghost the previous night in the Imperial Palace. Who would dare to go and rescue him? Suddenly they spotted Yin Zhiping, so they withdrew and

hid themselves. Yin Zhiping waited for a while and after not seeing any activity ahead, he went over to take a look...but those people were already gone without a trace. Then Miss Cheng told him everything she'd heard from Lu Guanying.

Yin Zhiping smiled and said, "So that's what he was thinking about. How could anybody guess it? Younger Martial Sister Cheng, you go and ask Martial Uncle Sun's help and I'll go and tell Master. As long as the Quanzhen Seven Masters are willing to act, what matter under the sky can't they solve?"

"But we must be careful not to mess things up," Miss Cheng said. Then she relayed what Lu Guanying said just before she left the inn.

"Humph," Yin Zhiping sneered, "Who is Huang Yaoshi anyway? Is he stronger than the Quanzhen Seven Masters?"

Miss Cheng was about to remind him not to be too arrogant, but seeing his stern expression she swallowed back the words that were on her lips. The two went back to the inn together.

Lu Guanying said, "Little Brother will have to take his leave. Whenever you pass through the Lake Tai area, please pay me a visit at Cloud Manor for a few days." Miss Cheng was crushed to have him leave so soon, but how could she dare to reveal her deepest feelings?

Yin Zhiping turned around to face the Kitchen God idol and said, "Kitchen God, Master, the Quanzhen Sect is most willing to help other people in distress. Whenever there is any injustice in Jianghu and the Quanzhen disciples find out about it, there is no way we will not intercede."



Lu Guanying knew these words were directed at him and he also spoke, "Kitchen God, Master, I pray that you will give your blessing so that this matter will be resolved peacefully. Disciple is forever grateful towards all those gentlemen who expend their energy to help."

Yin Zhiping said, "Kitchen God, Master, please do not worry. The Quanzhen Seven Masters' power shakes the world. As long as they are willing to act, there is nothing in this world they cannot deal with."

Lu Guanying was startled and thought, "How will my Grandmaster be convinced if the Quanzhen Seven Masters rely on power?" He quickly said, "Kitchen God, Master, you know that my Grandmaster comes and goes as he wishes and never pays attention to other people. To others who speak to him as friends, he will certainly listen, but he loathes it if others try to reason with him."

"Ha, ha ..." Yin Zhiping laughed, then said, "Kitchen God, Master, how can the Quanzhen Seven Masters be afraid of others? Originally this matter had nothing to do with us and my Master only sent me to deliver a warning, but if anybody provokes us Quanzhen disciples, I don't care whether he is Huang Yaoshi or Hei Yaoshi [surname 'huang' lit. 'Yellow', hei lit. 'Black'], the Quanzhen Sect will definitely teach him a lesson."

Lu Guanying felt anger rising in his chest and said, "Kitchen God, Master, what disciple just said, please just consider it as talking in my sleep. If anyone belittles us, we will no longer want to accept anyone's favor." These two were talking to each other, but they were facing the Kitchen God idol. One spoke and the other responded and gradually this exchange of words became hotter and hotter.

Miss Cheng wanted to interfere, but those two men were young and hot-tempered and neither was willing to yield even half a word. Finally Yin Zhiping said, "Kitchen God, Master, the Quanzhen Sect's martial arts are the purest of the orthodox skills, while others' have heretical skills. Even if they are good, how can they be measured against the Quanzhen Sect?"

Lu Guanying responded, "Kitchen God, Master, I have long heard of the reputation of the Quanzhen Sect's martial arts. Certainly there are many martial arts experts within the Quanzhen Sect, but this doesn't mean that there are no arrogant blabbermouths amongst the disciples."

Yin Zhiping was angry. His palm struck and the corner of the kitchen stove collapsed. He stared hard and shouted loudly, "Kid, you demean people!"

'Bang!' Lu Guanying struck the other corner and it fell to the floor. He shouted, "How would I dare to demean you? I am demeaning only those disciples who are condescending and conceited."

Yin Zhiping had seen Lu Guanying's martial arts skill just now and he knew it was inferior to his own, so his confidence was boosted. With a cold laugh he said, "Fine! Let us spar and we'll see who is conceited."

Lu Guanying knew perfectly well he was not Yin Zhiping's match, but he hated it when others insulted his school. He was like someone riding on a tiger's back. He could not continue riding, but it was difficult to get off safely. He drew his saber, made a gesture of respect with his left hand and said, "Little Brother is ready to receive the Quanzhen Sect's excellent stances."

Miss Cheng was very anxious and tears streamed down from her eyes. She wanted to throw herself between these

two men, but each time she thought to do so, her courage failed her. She saw Yin Zhiping sweep his fly-whisk and step forward to launch his attack. Straightaway the two fought ferociously.

Lu Guanying did not expect victory...he merely hoped he would avoid an embarrassing defeat. He immediately launched the 'Buddhist Worthy One Saber technique' [luo han dao fa] he'd learned from Reverend Kumu [Dead Wood], creating a tight defense around himself.

Yin Zhiping assumed the offensive position immediately and to his surprise he found the opponent's saber power to be quite strong. He realized he had recklessly underestimated his opponent when his left arm was almost chopped off. His heart quivered and he hastily concentrated his attention on facing the attack and responding accordingly. Utilizing his school's special skill of calming his mind and spirit, he used slow steps with quick hand movements. Only by doing this did he gradually gain the upper hand.

For the past several months, Lu Guanying had received his father's instructions so he'd progressed by leaps and bounds. but the length of his training was too short for him to be compared to Yin Zhiping who was the main disciple of Qiu Chuji.

Huang Rong watched this fight through the small mirror. She saw Yin Zhiping gradually take the lead and she cursed in her heart. "This 'xiao za mao' [lit. small mixed-up hair - a derogatory term for Taoist priest] was disparaging my father. If Jing ge ge was not injured, I would certainly teach you some lessons about the heretical Peach Blossom Island martial arts. Aiyo! This is not good!" She saw Lu Guanying's saber strike with a familiar stance which Yin Zhiping intercepted and diverted with his whisk. Then he twisted his hand and his finger moved with exceptional speed

towards the crook of Lu Guanying's elbow. Lu Guanying felt his arm go numb and his saber fell to the floor. Without showing any mercy, Yin Zhiping swept his whisk towards Lu Guanying's face while loudly shouting, "This is the Quanzhen Sect's martial arts...remember it well!" His whisk was made of horse's tail mixed with strands of silver. Should Lu Guanying's face get hit, it would certainly be slashed with countless cuts.

Lu Guanying understood the danger and quickly ducked. The whisk followed by sweeping downward. Suddenly a tender voice shouted, "Older Martial Brother Yin!" Miss Cheng thrust her sword to block the whisk. Lu Guanying took that opportunity to leap back and pick up his saber from the floor.

Yin Zhiping laughed coldly, "Good! Younger Martial Sister Cheng...you are helping an outsider. Come! You two lovers can fight me together."

"You ... you ..." Miss Cheng stammered.

'Swish! Swish! Swish!' Yin Zhiping swept his fly-whisk three times, forcing her to move her hands and feet in an uncoordinated manner. Lu Guanying saw her precarious situation, so he raised his saber and joined the two against one fight. Miss Cheng did not want to fight her martial brother, so she jumped back.

"Come!" Yin Zhiping said, "He cannot fight me alone. In a while you will come and help again him anyway."

Huang Rong watched these three people fighting each other with amusement. Just as she was wondering how this matter could be resolved, she suddenly heard some noises from the door. She saw Peng Lianhu, Sha Tongtian, along with Wanyan Honglie, Yang Kang, and the others coming in together.

They had been waiting for Hou Tonghai for a long time and he had not come back. Sha Tongtian was concerned for his martial brother. Gathering his courage, he quietly came over to take a look. He saw two people fighting inside the inn and noticed their martial arts skills were only average. He waited for a long time but could not see anybody else. He was afraid to go in alone, so he went back, gathered the others, and brought them back to the inn.

Yin and Lu saw these people come in so they leaped back and stopped fighting. They asked these newcomers for their names, but Sha Tongtian only stepped forward with arms open and grabbed both men's wrists. Meanwhile, Peng Lianhu stooped down and untied Hou Tonghai's hands.

Hou Tonghai had been suffering for nearly half a day and was really angry. Without taking the cloth from his mouth, he roared and threw himself at Miss Cheng, attacking her with his palms. Miss Cheng evaded by moving backward in a circle. Hou Tonghai's face was purple from the bruising he'd received and his fists went straight, up and down, as he fiercely attacked Miss Cheng.

"Hold on!" Peng Lianhu repeatedly said. "Let's talk first." But since Hou Tonghai's mouth and ears were stopped with cloth, how could he have heard anything?

The acupoint on Lu Guanying's wrist was grabbed by Sha Tongtian. He felt half his body go numb and he could not move. Seeing Miss Cheng in danger and Hou Tonghai acting like a mad tiger, he struggled hard and without knowing where the strength came from, shook loose from Sha Tongtian's grip. Then he fiercely threw himself towards Hou Tonghai.

Before he reached his target, Peng Lianhu swept his leg and sent him tumbling down and immediately pounced on

him. He grabbed Lu Guanying by the back of his neck and lifted him up. "Who are you?" he asked. "Where is that fellow who played the ghost?"

Suddenly, the door creaked and opened slowly. Everyone turned their heads at once, but nobody came in. Peng Lianhu and the others could not help but feel shivers of fear in their hearts. Just as suddenly, a female head with disheveled hair was at the door. Liang Ziweng and Lingzhi Shangren jumped up in fright and even shouted, "This is not good...a female ghost!"

Peng Lianhu could see that she was just an ordinary country girl. "Come in!" he shouted.

Sha Gu walked in with a giggle and, while sticking out her tongue, she said, "Wah, so many people!"

Liang Ziweng was the one who shouted, "Female Ghost!" earlier and now he could see that she was just a poor peasant girl with tattered clothes and a silly demeanor. Filled with shame, he became angry. He jumped forward and shouted, "Who are you?" Stretching out his hand, he grabbed her arm. Who would have thought that Sha Gu would withdraw her arm, flip her hand, then her palm struck with the Peach Blossom Island's 'Jade-Green Wave Palm technique' [bi bo zhang fa]? Although her skill was unrefined, the stance was subtle and wonderful to see. Liang Ziweng did not defend against her counterattack at all. 'Slap!' Sha Gu's palm hit the back of his hand hard.

Liang Ziweng was stunned and angry at the same time. "Good!" he called out. "You are only playing dumb!" He rushed forward with both fists raised. Just as Sha Gu stepped back to evade, she suddenly pointed towards his shiny bald head and burst out laughing. This laughter caught everyone by surprise. Liang Ziweng was stunned

and stopped dead in his tracks for a few seconds...then he ferociously resumed his attack. Sha Gu raised her hands to block, but staggered back. She knew she was not his match, so she turned around and tried to run away, but Liang Ziweng would not let her escape. He stretched his left leg to block her, while his elbow struck backwards, followed by his fist. Sha Gu's nose was hit hard and she felt her head spinning. She cried out, "Sister who eats watermelons, come out quickly! Help me! Somebody is hitting me!"

Huang Rong was startled and thought, "My not killing this dumb girl was a big mistake. She is bound to bring us disaster." Suddenly she heard a soft 'humph' sound. It was so soft, almost inaudible, but Huang Rong's heart jumped with delight. "Father is here!" she thought. Quickly she looked through the small hole and saw Huang Yaoshi wearing a human-skin mask, standing on the doorstep. Nobody saw him come and it seemed as if he had just arrived...but it also seemed as if he had been there before anybody else came. He stood motionless like a piece of wood, without showing the least bit of emotion on his face. Anyone who saw him could not help but shudder. He did not have a green face nor did he have fierce teeth and he did not even look loathsome or ugly, but in all honesty, nobody could say that his face belonged to a living person.

Sha Gu had only exchanged three stances with Liang Ziweng but Huang Yaoshi could immediately tell that she was using the martial arts of his school. With a head full of questions he asked, "Miss, who is your master? Where is he?"

Sha Gu simply shook her head and stared at him blankly. She suddenly clapped her hands and laughed. Huang Yaoshi frowned and he knew she must have had some relations with his disciples. If not their disciple, then she must be of their family or a relative. He was very fond of

and tended to be over-protective towards his disciples. In no way would he allow anybody to bully them. Mei Chaofeng was a renegade disciple of his and she had committed a great crime against her master. Yet when she was defeated by Guo Jing, Huang Yaoshi would still help her, much less Sha Gu, who was a naïve and child-like young girl. Therefore he said, “Dumb kid...others hit you, why don’t you hit back?”

That day on the boat, when Huang Yaoshi was looking for his daughter, he did not wear a mask, so his appearance was not the same as today and nobody recognized him, but as soon as he opened his mouth, Wanyan Honglie, Yang Kang and Peng Lianhu, remembered his voice and tentatively guessed his identity. Peng Lianhu knew this evil man must not have good things in mind and also guessed that the ghost in the Imperial Palace last night might be this man. He knew there was no way he could fight him, so while there was the opportunity, he was thinking of launching his thirty-sixth stratagem, namely...running away.

Sha Gu said, “I can’t hit him!”

“Who says you cannot hit him?” Huang Yaoshi said. “He hit your nose, then you must hit his nose. He hit you once, so you must pay him back three times.”

Sha Gu laughed. “All right!” she said. Without thinking about Liang Ziweng’s skill being way above hers, she walked over to him and said, “You hit my nose...I must hit your nose. You hit me once...I must pay you back three times.” Her fist went straight for his nose.

Liang Ziweng raised his hand to block when suddenly the ‘Crooked Reservoir’ [qu chi] acupoint at the bend of his arm went numb. His hand was half way up but could go no further. ‘Bang!’ his nose was squarely hit by Sha Gu’s fist.



“Two!” Sha Gu called out and sent out another fist.

Liang Ziweng bent his knees while keeping his back straight and his left hand moved straight out using one of the highest ‘Seize and Control’ [qin na] techniques. He was sure he could turn Sha Gu’s arm and divert the attack. Who would have thought that as soon as his fingers touched Sha Gu’s arm, the ‘Scholar’s Arm’ [bi ru] acupoint on his arm went numb and he was unable to divert Sha Gu’s fist. ‘Bang!’ for the second time his nose was hit by Sha Gu. It was such a violent blow that his head was thrown backwards and he staggered, almost falling down. Liang Ziweng was really angry.

The others were astounded, but they did not see anything unusual. Peng Lianhu was an expert in hidden projectile usage and he was the only one who noticed something. Each time Liang Ziweng tried to block the attack, Peng Lianhu heard the very light swishing sound of secret projectiles. He knew Huang Yaoshi had launched some kind of tiny metal needles towards Liang Ziweng’s acupoints, but he did not see Huang Yaoshi’s arm move, so he did not know how Huang Yaoshi did it.

Actually Huang Yaoshi was flicking his finger inside his sleeve and sending the needles through the fabric towards the enemy. The needles arrived suddenly, invisible and were almost inaudible. How could an enemy evade this kind of attack?

“Three!” Sha Gu called out. Neither of Liang Ziweng’s arms would obey their master’s orders. His eyes saw the fist coming straight towards his face and he did not have any choice but to step backwards to evade it. Just as he was about to step back, the ‘White Ocean’ [bai hai] acupoint on the inside of his right leg suddenly went numb. His shock

had not yet subsided when a spark flashed in the air and he felt tears brimming in his eyes.

As it turned out, when his nose was hit the tear acupoint was also hit. He had always regarded defeat in martial arts contests as nothing important, but if tears streamed down his face, his lifelong reputation would be ruined. He hastily tried to lift his sleeve to wipe the tears away, but his arm did not obey. Two big teardrops finally rolled down his cheeks.

Sha Gu saw his tears and quickly said, "Please don't cry! Don't be afraid, I won't hit you anymore."

Compared to the three blows to his nose, those two comforting sentences were more difficult for Liang Ziwen to bear. In embarrassment, he vomited a mouthful of blood. He looked up at Huang Yaoshi and said, "Who are you Sire? You harm people secretly ...what kind of hero are you?"

With a cold laugh Huang Yaoshi replied, "Are you worthy enough to ask my name?" Suddenly he raised his voice, "Everybody...leave my presence!"

Everyone standing on the sidelines had felt their limbs and hundreds of bones weaken and none had the guts to fight. They just stood still in that inn without knowing what to do. When they heard his shout, it was as if they had just received a pardon for their lives. Peng Lianhu was the first one who wanted to leave, but after two steps he saw that Huang Yaoshi was standing in the doorway, not allowing anybody to pass, so he stopped dead in his tracks.

Huang Yaoshi sneered, "I told you to go, but you don't go. Do you want me to slaughter all of you one by one?"

Peng Lianhu had heard about Huang Yaoshi's strange temperament so he would do what he said. Therefore, Peng

Lianhu turned to the rest and said, "This Senior Master told us to leave. Let's just leave."

By this time Hou Tonghai had pulled the cloth from his mouth. He dashed towards Huang Yaoshi and glared at him menacingly. "Let me pass!" he shouted.

Huang Yaoshi did not pay him any attention to him. "You are not worthy to make me move aside," he said flatly. "If you want to live, crawl out between my legs."

Everyone looked at each other with blank dismay and it was clear from their expressions that they were angry. They thought that even though Huang Yaoshi might be highly skilled, there were many skilled pugilists gathered in that room. If they joined forces and risked it all, they might not necessarily lose.

Hou Tonghai roared and jumped at Huang Yaoshi. With a cold laugh, Huang Yaoshi moved his left hand and Hou Tonghai was lifted high in the air. Then his right hand pulled Hou Tonghai's left arm. 'Crack!' Hou Tonghai's arm, flesh and bones, was torn from his body. Huang Yaoshi cast the severed arm and the man to the floor. He raised his head to look at the sky, seemingly indifferent to his surroundings. Hou Tonghai passed out from the severe pain and blood gushed forth like a fountain from the wound from his missing arm.

Everyone's face changed color. Huang Yaoshi slowly turned his head and his eyes swept past everyone's face one by one. Sha Tongtian, Peng Lianhu and the others were used to killing people without batting an eye, but seeing Huang Yaoshi's gaze on them, they involuntarily shuddered with fear. With their hair standing on end, goose bumps appeared on their skin.

Huang Yaoshi suddenly roared, "Are you going to crawl or not?" The mere sound of his voice was enough to scare the hell out of them. Nobody any longer thought about joining forces and attacking him together. Peng Lianhu hung his head and was the first to crawl out between his legs. Sha Tongtian released Yin and Lu and, holding his martial brother in his arms, he followed. Yang Kang helped Wanyan Honglie, followed by Liang Ziweng and Lingzhi Shangren, as one by one they crawled out between Huang Yaoshi's legs. Once they were out the door, they scurried away like frightened cats. None dared to turn around and look back.

**End of Chapter 24.**

# **Chapter 25 - Desolated Inn in the Village**

**Translated by Sunnysnow & Frans Soetomo**



*Huang Yaoshi was silent, thinking about his daughter but hiding his sadness. Lu Guanyin and Cheng Yaojia stole glances at Huang Yaoshi and looked at each other, feeling happy but awkward. Their faces and ears were red.*

Huang Yaoshi laughed and said, "Guan Yin and this lady, stay." Lu Guanyin was aware that his grand-teacher had arrived earlier but when he saw Huang Yaoshi with his mask on, he was afraid that the former would not be willing to remove his identity and thus, didn't dare to address him properly. He decided to bow politely four times so as to greet Huang Yaoshi.

When Yin Zhiping saw how formidable Huang Yaoshi looked, he knew that he was of high status and bowed while saying, "Quanzhen Sect's Eternal Spring's disciple, Yin Zhiping greets senior."

Huang Yaoshi retorted, "Everyone has gotten lost and I did not ask you to stay on. Why are you still here? Are you tired of living?"

Yin Zhiping was taken aback, "Disciple is a student of Eternal Spring of Quanzhen Sect. I am not a criminal."

Huang Yaoshi answered, "So what if you're from Quanzhen Sect?" With that, he grabbed a corner of the table and removed a piece of wood before flinging it effortlessly at Yin Zhiping. Yin Zhiping quickly used his whisk to raise some dusts to block the attack but the small piece of wood seemed to be made out of metal and he felt a strong force charge towards him. He could not defend the force and the piece of wood and whisk slapped onto his cheek. Yin Zhiping felt a strong pain and there seemed to be some stuff in his mouth. He hurriedly spitted it out onto his palm

before realizing that it was a few of his teeth, which laid on his bloody palm. He was shocked and frightened and didn't dare to make any sound.

Huang Yaoshi continued coldly, "I am the one called Huang Yaoshi, Hei Yaoshi. What does Quanzhen Sect want so show me?" With these words, Yin Zhiping and Cheng Yaojia were taken aback.

Lu Guanyin was also shaken and thought to himself, "Grand-teacher must have heard me quarrel with that little Taoist quarrel just now. If he heard what I said to Prince Zao, then...then...I think father will also..." before breaking into cold sweat. Yin Zhiping rubbed his cheek and said, "You are a senior in the Wulin World but why do you behave so shrewdly? The 6 freaks of Jiangnan are heroic people, why must you force to them the corner? If not for my teacher spreading the news, won't the 6 of them be killed by you already?"

Huang Yaoshi was furious, "No wonder I couldn't find them. So it's a bunch of rascals poking their noses into this matter."

Yin Zhiping was agitated and shouted, "If you want to kill me, then do so. I'm not afraid of you."

Huang Yaoshi replied coldly, "Didn't you have fun scolding me behind my back?"

Yin Zhiping spared no thought for his life and shouted, "I'll scold in front of you as well. You demon, you weirdo!"

Ever since Huang Yaoshi became famous, no one, no matter good or bad, would dare to be offensive in front of him. He had never met someone as straightforward and disrespectful as Yin Zhiping. The latter had seen how cruelly he dealt with Hou Tonghai just now and yet, was still

not afraid to offend him. Huang Yaoshi was surprised and thought that the little Taoist had backbone and was bold, as bold he when he was young. Huang Yaoshi could not help but compare Yin Zhiping to his younger self while he stepped forward and said in a cold voice, "If you dare, scold some more."

Yin Zhiping said, "I'm not scared of you and yes I want to scold you demonic weirdo."

Lu Guanyin thought secretly, "Oh no, the little Taoist is not going to be able to escape death." He yelled out, "Bold Bastard! You dare offend my grand-teacher?" With that, he raised his saber and made an attack for his shoulder. Lu Guanyin was actually secretly trying to help Yin Zhiping. He was sure that his Huang Yaoshi would show him no mercy after all the insults. If Huang Yaoshi attacked, even ten Yin Zhipings would not be able to escape alive. Lu Guanyin hoped that if he injured Yin Zhiping, his grand-teacher's anger would subside somewhat and let that little Taoist off.

Yin Zhiping evaded the attack with two steps and frowned angrily before shouting, "I don't want to live after today so I'm going to scold until I'm happy." Lu Guanyin was bent on injuring him so as to save his life and thus, made another attack with his saber. At the same moment, Cheng Yaojia unsheathed her sword and called out, "I'm also a disciple of Quanzhen sect. If you want to kill, then kill both of us!"

Yin Zhiping did not expect this and shouted, "Good, Apprentice Sister Cheng!" Both of them stood shoulder-to-shoulder and stared at Huang Yaoshi. Lu Guanyin could not attack anymore.

Huang Yaoshi laughed out, "Good, you have guts, have backbone. I, Huang Yaoshi am in fact a heretic demon, you didn't scold wrongly. Your teacher is my junior, how can I



fight with a little Taoist then? Go then!" He suddenly stretched out his arm and grabbed Yin Zhiping's chest before flinging him outside. Yin Zhiping couldn't control himself and flew out of the door. He thought that he would fall badly but who would have thought that both his feet landed on the ground and he was still standing normally. He thought that Huang Yaoshi must have grabbed him and dropped him gently onto the ground. Yin Zhiping dazed for a second before thinking, "Close Shave!" No matter how brave he was, he did not dare go back into the inn to scold Huang Yaoshi. He stroked his swollen cheek and turned to leave.

Cheng Yaojia sheathed her sword and made to leave when Huang Yaoshi said, "Wait."

He stretched out his hand to remove his mask and asked, "Are you willing to be his wife?" while pointing at Lu Guanyin. Cheng Yaojia was shocked but her snow-white skin to turn red slowly.

Huang Yaoshi said, "Your apprentice brother scolded right. I am a heretic weirdo. Who doesn't know about Eastern Heretic Huang Yaoshi, the owner of Peach Blossom Island? The thing Old Heretic Huang hates most this life is rules and conventions, especially saints and whatnots. These are just things to cheat dumb people. It's such a joke that people have been blindly abiding to these rules and conventions for generations! I, Huang Yaoshi don't believe in these nonsensical teachings. Everyone say I'm heretic, humph! At least a heretic is better than those jerks who talk about morals and principals but caused the deaths of so many!" Cheng Yaojia was silent but her heart beat wildly. She did not know how he was going to deal with her.

But she only heard him say, "Tell me properly. Do you want to marry my grand-disciple? I like people who are

straightforward and have backbone. That little Taoist scolded me behind my back. If he didn't dare do that in front of me and kneeled down to beg me just now, do you think I would have killed him? Humph, you dared to help that little Taoist even though you knew it was dangerous, so it shows that your character is good and compatible with my Grand-disciple. Hurry up and answer me!"

Cheng Yaojia was willing with all her heart but she didn't even dare tell people like her parents, what more an outsider? Furthermore, Lu Guanyin was standing beside him. Huang Yaoshi saw that her pretty face was as red as a rose while Lu Guanyin also lowered his head and suddenly thought of his daughter. He let out a sigh and said, "If both of you love each other, I will give my blessings. Ah, even parents can't decide the marriage for their children."

He knew that if he had agreed to his daughter and Guo Jing's marriage, his beloved daughter would not have died in the deep sea and was vexed. He raised his voice, "Guanyin, stop beating around the bush, do you want her to be your wife or not?"

Lu Guanyin was stunned and answered hurriedly, "Grand-teacher, Grand-disciple's afraid that I am not good enough for..." Huang Yaoshi cut in, "Good enough! You are my grand-disciple, you are good enough even for a princess!"

Lu Guanyin saw Huang Yaoshi's eagerness and knew that if continued hesitating, the situation would turn worse. He answered hurriedly, "Grand-disciple is willing." Huang Yaoshi smiled and said, "Good. What about you Miss?"

Cheng Yaojia felt a sweet sensation in her heart when she heard Lu Guanyin's words, when she heard Huang Yaoshi's question, she lowered her head and said softly, "I need father to help me decide."

Huang Yaoshi replied, "What parent's decision? All nonsensical rubbish, I want to be the one to make the decision! If your father is unwilling, ask him to come and duel with me."

Cheng Yaojia smiled, "Father only knows how to calculate accounts and do calligraphy, he doesn't know any martial arts." Huang Yaoshi thought for a while, "Then we'll compete using calculation! Humph, talking about calculations, who on earth can win me? Hurry up, are you willing or not?"

Cheng Yaojia kept quiet and Huang Yaoshi said, "Alright, so you aren't willing then, it's up to you. We keep to our words and Old Heretic Huang never allows anyone to regret their decisions." Cheng Yaojia stole a glance at Lu Guanyin and saw that his expression had turned anxious. She thought to herself, "Father dotes on me the most. If I ask Auntie to talk to father and you ask someone to seek my hand, father will agree. Why are you so anxious?"

Huang Yaoshi stood up and shouted, "Guanyin, follow me to look for the 6 freaks of Jiangnan! If you ever speak to this lady again, I'll cut off both of your tongues."

Lu Guanyin was shocked and knew that his grand-teacher was capable of such acts. He walked in front of Cheng Yaojia and cupped his palms into a greeting posture before saying, "Miss, Lu Guanyin is lowly skilled in martial arts and is untalented and uneducated. I live a wandering life and am not good enough for you. But I think it is fate that we should meet today..."

Cheng Yaojia answered softly, "Mister doesn't have to be humble. I...I...am not..." and she kept silent. Lu Guanyin's heart skipped a beat and he thought to make her answer by nodding or shaking her head, "Miss, if you do not find me

up to par with you, please shake your head." After he said this, his heart pumped frantically as he looked at her delicate face, worried that she would shake her head.

After a while, Cheng Yaojia still kept still and did not even move a finger. Lu Guanyin was delighted and said, "Since Miss is willing to marry me, please nod your head." But Cheng Yaojia still did not move. Lu Guanyin was anxious and Huang Yaoshi was exasperated and said, "You don't shake and you don't nod. What does that mean?"

Cheng Yaojia said softly, "If I don't shake my head, it...it... means that I nod my head..." These words were mumbled so softly such that only Huang Yaoshi, who had a high level of internal energy and sharp ears, could hear it. Had it been a few years earlier, he would not be able to hear anything but just see her lips moving slightly.

Huang Yaoshi laughed loudly, "Wang Chongyang has all along been a heroic and brave man. Who would have thought that his disciple would be so wishy-washy? That's just so funny. Alright, I will see through your marriage today." The couple was taken aback and stared at Huang Yaoshi speechlessly, who continued asking, "Where is that silly lady? I want to ask her who her teacher is." When the three of them were talking in the inn, Sha Gu had disappeared somewhere.

Huang Yaoshi continues, "Anyway, there's no rush to find her now. Guanyin, you will marry Miss Cheng here then." Lu Guanyin replied, "Grand-disciple is very grateful for grand-teacher's love but to marry here is somehow too plain..." Huang Yaoshi retorted, "You are a disciple of the Peach Blossom Island, do you want to abide to conventions as well? Come come, stand side by side both of you, and bow to the sky!" His tone was stern and serious and they did not dare disobey him. Cheng Yaojia had reached this stage and

knew that she could not do anything but carry on the rituals with Lu Guanyin. Huang Yaoshi continued, "Bow to the earth!...Bow to your grand-teacher ah...good, good, happiness, happiness! Bow to each other!"

Huang Rong and Guo Jing watched Huang Yaoshi orchestrate the show and were surprised but delighted as well. They found it very funny while Huang Yaoshi continued, "Excellent! Guanyin, go and get a candle for your nuptial night." Lu Guanyin was stunned and said, "Grand-teacher!" Huang Yaoshi replied, "Why? After completing the ceremony, isn't it time for your nuptial night? You and your wife are pugilists, so you don't need a glamorous room with beautiful blankets right? Can't you also have your nuptial night in this broken inn?" Lu Guanyin didn't dare answer back but he was excited and delighted at the same time. He followed his grand-teacher's instructions and went to the village to get a pair of red candles, some wine and chicken, and prepared a meal with Cheng Yaojia in the kitchen before serving it to their grand-teacher.

After that, Huang Yaoshi was silent and raised his head, thinking about his daughter but hiding his sadness. Huang Rong saw his expressions and knew that he was thinking about her. She felt terrible and wanted to shout out but was afraid that once her father discovered her, would bring her back to Peach Blossom Island. Even if he did not kill Guo Jing, Guo Jing would not be able to survive. When she thought about this, she took back her hand from the door. Lu Guanyin and Cheng Yaojia stole glances at Huang Yaoshi and looked at each other, while feeling happy but awkward. Their faces and ears were both red and they did not dare to make a sound. Ouyang Ke was lying amongst the straws and wood and listened attentively. Although he was starving, he did not dare to make any noise.

The sky gradually turned dark. Cheng Yaojia's heart was thumping louder and louder. She heard Huang Yaoshi talking to himself, "Why hasn't that Silly Girl come back? Humph, that bunch of traitors better not give her any trouble." Turning his head to Lu Guanying he said, "Tonight is your wedding night; why don't you light some candles?"

"Yes!" Lu Guanying replied. He took a flint and lighted the candles. Under the bright candlelight he saw that Cheng Da Xiaojie's [Eldest Miss Cheng] hair on her temples were like a cloud of mist, her cheeks were as white as snow, her face showed a bashful and surprised feeling; it was truly hard to describe with words. Outside the door the insects were buzzing, the evening breeze swayed the bamboo trees; he felt like it was a dream!

Huang Yaoshi took a wooden bench and placed it on the doorstep, then he laid down on it. Soon afterwards he was snoring lightly; looked like he was sound asleep. Lu and Cheng couple still did not dare to move. After a long time the red candle burned out, the flame died down and the room became dark.

Lu and Cheng couple spoke to each other in low voices. Huang Rong leaned her head sideways trying to listen, but she could not hear what they were talking about. Suddenly she felt Guo Jing's body tremble, his breathing has quickened. Apparently his internal energy flow had reached a branched passage, so she busily helped him to overcome this obstacle. After his breathing turned normal she turned her attention to the room one more time. She saw the moonlight slanted down from the broken window outside. Lu and Cheng couple was still sitting side by side on the bench. She heard Cheng Yaojia speak in low voice, "Do you know what day is today?"

"Today is our happiest day," Lu Guanying replied.

"That goes without saying," Cheng Yaojia said, "Today is the second day of the seventh month, my third [maternal] aunt's birthday."

Lu Guanying smiled, "Ah, you must have many relatives," he said, "It must be difficult to remember all those birthdays."

Huang Rong thought, "Your wife belongs to a big clan in Baoying; her maternal aunts', her paternal aunts', her nephews' and nieces' birthdays will come and go; but can they be compared to you, the Great Leader Lu of the Lake Tai's stronghold?" Suddenly she recalled something, "Today is the second day of the seventh month, Jing Gege will need until the seventh to recover. The Beggar Clan's general assembly is on the fifteenth at Yueyang City. We have a very tight schedule."

Suddenly there was a long whistle outside, followed by a loud laughter, shaking the roof tiles; it was precisely Zhou Botong's voice. He called out, "Old Poison, you have been chasing me from Lin'an to Jiaxing and from Jiaxing back to Lin'an, one day and one night, throughout you can't overtake the Old Urchin. Victory or defeat between us two has already been decided. What else do you want to compete in?"

Huang Rong was startled, "From Lin'an to Jiaxing and back is more than five hundred 'li's; these two men's feet are truly fast."

Ouyang Feng's voice was heard replying, "Even if you run to the end of the earth I will still chase you."

Zhou Botong laughed, "We won't eat, we won't sleep, we won't even urinate or defecate; let's see who can run the longest. Do you dare to compete with me?"

“Why not?” Ouyang Feng replied, “I want to see who will drop dead of exhaustion first!”

“Old Poison,” Zhou Botong said, “You won’t be able to compete with me in not urinating and not defecating.”

They both stopped talking and let out a long laugh instead, but the laughter seemed to come from more than a dozen of ‘zhang’s away already. Lu Guanying and Cheng Yaojia did not know what kind of people these men were, who swiftly came and went in the middle of the night. They looked at each other in astonishment; then hand in hand they walked to the door to take a look.

Huang Rong thought, “If these two are competing their feet power, then father will surely want to watch.” Sure enough, she heard Lu Guanying’s surprised voice, “Ah, where is Grandmaster?”

“Look over there,” Cheng Yaojia said, “There are three shadows; the last one looks like your Grandmaster.”

“That’s right,” Lu Guanying said, “Ah, they are that far already. I wonder what kind of experts those two are. Too bad we did not have any chance to meet them.”

Huang Rong thought, “The Old Urchin is all right, but you’d better not meet the Old Poison.”

As Huang Yaoshi left, Lu and Cheng two people thought that they were alone in that inn; their hearts started to get devious. Lu Guanying circled his arm around his newly-wed wife’s waist and asked in a low voice, “Meizi [Little sister – term of endearment], what is your given name?”

Cheng Yaojia said with a chuckle, “I won’t say it, you guess.”

Lu Guanying smiled, “If not Xiao Mao [kitten], then it must be Xiao Gou [puppy].”



Cheng Yaojia laughed, "Neither. It's Mu Da Zhong [mother big bug]."

"Ah," Lu Guanying laughed, "Then I must catch you."

Cheng Yaojia wriggled and leaped over the table. Lu Guanying laughed and chased her. One ran, the other chased, they were both laughing and giggling, running around the inn. The starlight was dim, Huang Rong was unable to see these two clearly, but she could hear their laughter clearly. Suddenly Guo Jing whispered in her ear, "Do you think he can catch Cheng Da Xiaojie?"

With a light chuckle Huang Rong replied, "Certainly."

Guo Jing asked again, "After he catches her, then what happen?"

Huang Rong's heart skipped a beat; she did not know the answer. She heard Lu Guanying had succeeded in catching Cheng Yaojia, the couple then sat on the bench, hugging each other and talking in low voices.

Huang Rong's right hand was holding Guo Jing's left. She felt his palm was getting hotter and hotter, while his body trembled faster and faster. She was frightened, busily asked, "Jing Gege, what happened?"

After Guo Jing suffered a heavy injury, his internal strength considerably decreased, practicing this Nine Yin energy cultivation method required a clean heart, free from any devilish thought. Right now he heard that Lu and Cheng couple was talking and laughing intimately; at the same time right next to him was his own beloved beautiful girl. Gradually he lost control, his blood warmed up to the point of boiling. He turned around and stretched out his right hand to embrace her shoulder. But as she heard his rushed breathing and felt his burning hot palm, Huang Rong was

frightened and busily said, "Jing Gege, be careful, quickly calm your heart."

Guo Jing's heart was shaken, anxiously he said, "I can't. Rong'er, I ... I ..." He wanted to stand up.

Huang Rong was very anxious, "You must not move!" she said.

Forcing himself Guo Jing sat down; he tried hard to control his breathing, but his chest felt like it will almost burst open. "Rong'er, help me," he begged. Once again he wanted to stand up.

"Sit down!" Huang Rong shouted, "If you don't, I'll seal your acupoint."

"Right," Guo Jing said, "Quick! I can't take it anymore."

Huang Rong realized that if his acupoint was sealed, his internal energy flow would be blocked, then their two days of effort would be wasted and they would have to start from the beginning again. But his condition was critical, as soon as he stood up, his life would be in danger. So gritting her teeth her left arm made a circle with the 'lan hua fu xue shou' [orchid brushing acupoint technique] and struck the 'zhang men' [sealing gate] acupoint on the eleventh rib on his left chest.

Her finger was right on target, but unexpectedly Guo Jing's internal strength was so profound that as soon as his body met an external force, the muscle automatically contracted and caused her finger to slip. Huang Rong struck twice in succession, both times missed. She was about to strike for the third time when suddenly he grabbed her left wrist.

It was almost dawn. Huang Rong saw his eyes were bloodshot like they were on fire, she was shocked; but she

felt that he was pulling her hand while his mouth was mumbling indistinctly, as if he was loosing his mind. In desperation Huang Rong moved her elbow and ferociously bumped her shoulder against his arm. As the thorns on the soft hedgehog armor pricked his arm, Guo Jing felt a shot of pain and was startled. Right at that moment they heard the rooster crow in the village. It was like a strike of lightning clearing out Guo Jing's mind. Slowly he put Huang Rong's wrist down; his face showed great embarrassment.

Huang Rong saw sweats dripping from his forehead; his face was pale and he looked so weary. But she knew the critical moment had passed. She said happily, "Jing Gege, we have passed two days and two nights."

'Slap!' Guo Jing slapped his own face and said, "Very dangerous!" He raised his hand to slap again. Huang Rong smiled and grabbed his hand. "That was nothing," she said, "You remember the Old Urchin? With that kind of skill he still could not bear to listen to my father's flute; much less you, who are seriously injured."

In their excitement as Guo Jing was battling his own mind, they forgot to lower their voices. All Lu Guanying and Cheng Yaojia cared for was each other, so naturally they were oblivious of everything else. But lying down in the room Ouyang Ke was fully awake, with his keen hearing he heard everything, he could even vaguely recognize Huang Rong's voice. He was surprised yet happy. He tried to listen carefully, but no more sound was to be heard. Both of his legs were broken, he was unable to walk, but by using hands as his feet he could stand upside down and he came out of his hiding.

Lu Guanying and his newly-wed wife were sitting side-by-side on the bench, with his left hand wrapped around her shoulder. Suddenly they heard rustling noise from the

firewood. Turning their heads around they saw a man standing on his hands come out from the inner room. They were startled and quickly drew their weapons out.

Ouyang Ke's injury was heavy, plus he had not had anything to eat for quite a long time, hence he was weak; suddenly seeing the bright flickering light of the blade he felt dizzy and fell down on the ground. Lu Guanying saw his sickly complexion; he rushed forward to help him sit on the bench with his back leaning against the table.

"Ah!" Cheng Yaojia called out in alarm, recognizing this man as the lecherous person who captured her at Baoying.

Lu Guanying saw her frightened expression, he said comfortingly, "Don't be afraid, his legs are broken."

"He is a bad man," Cheng Yaojia said, "I know him."

"Ah!" Lu Guanying exclaimed.

Ouyang Ke slowly woke up. "Give me a bowl of rice, please," he said, "I am starving."

Cheng Yaojia saw his deep cheeks, his eyes dull; he was not the same arrogant man who hurled insults to her. She was tenderhearted, plus she was a newly-wed, her heart was filled with happiness; thereupon she went to the kitchen and fetch a bowl of rice for Ouyang Ke.

Ouyang Ke ate one bowl, he asked for another bowl. After eating two big bowls of rice his strength returned. He looked at Cheng Da Xiaojie and his lewdness also returned. But he still remembered Huang Rong. "Where is Miss Huang?" he asked.

"Which Miss Huang?" Lu Guanying asked.

"The Peach Blossom Island's Huang Yaoshi's daughter," Ouyang Ke replied.

"You know my Huang Shigu [martial (paternal) aunt]?" Lu Guanying asked. "I heard she has passed away."

Ouyang Ke laughed. "Don't lie to me," he said, "Obviously I had just heard her voice." His left hand pushed the table, his body flipped and he walked around the room with his hands. He recalled that Huang Rong's voice came from the east side, but there was only a wall without any door on the east side. He considered carefully and came to the conclusion that there must be a secret in the cabinet. Immediately he pulled a table toward the cabinet, flipped his body over to sit on the table, and opened the cabinet door. Convinced that the secret passage must be inside, he was disappointed to see inside the cabinet was very dirty, unbearably filthy. He looked over carefully and saw some handprints on the dust covered iron bowl. His heart was stirred. Stretching out his arm he grabbed the bowl and tried to lift it up, but the bowl did not budge. He turned it around and with some creaking noise the secret door inside the cabinet slowly opened, revealing Huang Rong and Guo Jing two people sitting cross-legged inside the secret room.

He was delighted to see Huang Rong, but was scared and jealous to see Guo Jing by her side. After staring at them for half a day he finally asked, "Meizi, are you training martial art in here?"

Huang Rong had seen him through the small hole moving the table to the cabinet. She was sure they would be discovered soon, so she started thinking of ways to kill him. When the door started to move she whispered in Guo Jing's ear, "I'll lure him close, you finish him off with a Dragon Subduing Palm."

Guo Jing said, "I don't have any strength in my palm."

Huang Rong was about to say something else, but Ouyang Ke had already seen them. She thought, "How can I deceive him so that he will go far away and let us pass these five days and five nights in peace?"

Initially Ouyang Ke was rather afraid of Guo Jing, but seeing his thin and pale complexion he remembered his uncle said that in the imperial palace he had injured him severely with the Toad Stance; if Guo Jing did not die, then his injury must be extremely heavy. Looking at their expression he knew that his guess was 70, 80% correct. He wanted to try again, so he said, "Meizi, why don't you come out? It's too stuffy and tight to hide in there." He held out his hand to pull Huang Rong's sleeve.

Huang Rong raised her bamboo stick and with a 'bang da gou tou' [stick hits dog's head] she struck the top of his head. Her movement was very fierce; it was one of the deadliest stances of the Dog Beating Stick Technique. The stick carried a strong gust of wind, the oncoming force was swift and violent. Ouyang Ke hastily moved to the left to evade, but her stick suddenly swept horizontally. Ouyang Ke was startled, he somersaulted over the table and fell behind the table.

If Huang Rong could pursue, she would take advantage of this favorable situation and launch the 'fan jie gou tun' [flipping up and cutting the dog's butt]; certainly she would be able to harm his life. But she was sitting cross-legged and must not move, so she cried out inwardly, "What a pity!"

Lu Guanying and Cheng Yaojia were shocked to suddenly see there were people inside the cabinet. By the time they

saw clearly it was Guo Jing and Huang Rong, Ouyang Ke and Huang Rong had started fighting.

As Ouyang Ke fell down, his hands pushed the ground and he leaped back to the table and sat back down. He used the 'qin na' [grab and capture] technique trying to catch Huang Rong's hand across the secret room's door. Huang Rong's Dog Beating Stick Technique was marvelous, but she could not move; besides, she had to take Guo Jing's internal energy situation into consideration so that she could not use too much strength of her own. Ouyang Ke's martial art skill was actually several times better than hers, so after more than a dozen moves she fell into a desperately dangerous situation.

Lu Guanying husband and wife drew out their saber and sword and attacked from both sides. Ouyang Ke let out a long laugh and ferociously launched a palm strike hacking toward Guo Jing's face. At this moment Guo Jing was unable to exert any strength, so he simply closed his eyes waiting for death.

Huang Rong was shocked; she lifted up her stick to block. Ouyang Ke flipped his palm over and grabbed the end of the stick, pulling it out from Huang Rong's hand. Huang Rong could not match his strength; her body staggered forward. She was afraid her palm would be separated from Guo Jing's palm, so she let the stick go. Immediately she reached into her pocket and threw a steel needle out.

Those two were only several feet away from each other. By the time Ouyang Ke saw the flashing light, the steel needle was already in front of his face. Busily he bent his waist and threw his head backward, almost reclined on the table, thus evading the needle.

Lu Guanying saw his condition as if he was a sacrificial meat on the table, his saber chopped down toward Ouyang Ke's neck. Ouyang Ke rolled to the right and with a 'crack!' sound his saber hacked the tabletop. Right at that moment he heard swishing noise of a steel needle above him and suddenly felt his back numb; one side of his body was paralyzed. He wanted to move aside, but his right arm had already been grabbed by the enemy from behind.

Cheng Yaojia was shocked and rushed forward trying to help. Ouyang Ke laughed and said, "That's wonderful!" His hand moved so swiftly and grabbed the front upper part of Cheng Yaojia's gown. Cheng Yaojia hastily hacked her sword down to cut his hand, while trying to leap backward at the same time. 'Rip!' Her gown was torn by his hand. She was so scared that the sword almost fell from her hand; her face turned deathly pale and she did not dare to rush forward anymore.

Ouyang Ke sat at the corner of the table. He turned his head around and saw the door to the secret room was already closed. Recalling his dangerous encounter with steel needles earlier he shuddered in fear. "This little girl is really not easy to fight," he thought, "Aha! I got it! I am going to play around with this Cheng Da Xiaojie, let that kid surnamed Guo and the little girl hear it. Their concentration will be broken and thus their energy cultivation will be disrupted. I want to see if by that time she won't listen to me nicely." Thinking to this point he was very happy. He further considered, "This Huang family's little girl is like an angel, nevertheless I have to make her willing to follow me for the rest of her life. It won't be as much fun if I use force. I think it will be wonderful. Just marvelous beyond words!" So he turned to Cheng Yaojia and said, "Hey, Cheng Da Xiaojie, do you want him to live or to die?"



Cheng Yaojia saw her husband was in the hands of the enemy; she could not make any rash move. Hastily she said, "He has never wronged you, nor did he have any enmity with you. Please release him. You were very hungry a while ago. Didn't I give you some food to eat?"

Ouyang Ke laughed. "How can two bowls of rice pay the price of a life? Hey, hey, you've never imagined that one day you Quanzhen Sect people will ask someone else's help, have you?"

Cheng Yaojia said, "He ... he is the Peach Blossom Island's disciple; don't hurt him."

Ouyang Ke laughed, "Who told him to chop me with a saber? If I wasn't quick enough to evade, do you think my head will still be perched on my neck? Don't you use the Peach Blossom Island to scare me, Huang Yaoshi is my father-in-law."

Cheng Yaojia did not know whether he was lying or was telling the truth; she hastily said, "Then he is your junior. Just let him go, let him apologize to you later."

"Ha ... ha ..." Ouyang Ke laughed, "How can there be such an easy thing in this world? You want me to release him? That's easy, but you must do what I tell you to do."

Cheng Yaojia saw the lewdness in his face, she knew he must have malicious intentions; hence she lowered her head but did not say anything.

"Look at me!" Ouyang Ke roared. 'Crack!' his palm hacked down and cut the corner of the table; making a neat cut as if the table was cut by an axe or a saber. Cheng Yaojia was stunned, she thought, "Even my Shifu does not have this kind of ability." Ouyang Ke had been training martial art under his uncle's tutelage since he was little; no wonder his

skill surpassed Sun Bu'er who started to learn martial art in her adulthood.

Seeing the frightened look on her face Ouyang Ke was immensely puffed up. "You must do whatever I tell you to do," he said, "Otherwise I'll do this to his neck." Then he made a hacking move. Cheng Yaojia broke in cold sweats and called out in alarm.

"Will you do it?" Ouyang Ke asked. Cheng Yaojia reluctantly nodded her head. Ouyang Ke said with a smile, "Good! That's my good girl. Now go and close the door." Cheng Yaojia hesitated; she did not move.

"You are not listening!" Ouyang Ke was angry. Cheng Yaojia trembled in fear; she did not have any choice but stand up and close the door.

Ouyang Ke said with a smile, "You two got married last night, I heard it clearly from the other room. It was your wedding night, but you did not take your clothes off. There is no such thing in this world. You don't know how to be a bride, so I am going to teach you. Now take your clothes off. All of them. If you leave even half a strand of silk, I am going to send your husband returning to heaven, and then you will become a young widow!"

Lu Guanying could not move his body, but he could hear clearly. He was so angry that he felt his eyes were about to pop out of their sockets. He wanted to tell his wife to run away and forget about him, but his lips were unable to move.

When Ouyang Ke grabbed Lu Guanying, Huang Rong quickly closed the door to the secret room. She took her dagger out, waiting for his second attack. Suddenly she heard him ordering Cheng Yaojia to take her clothes off; she was angry, but at the same time found it amusing. She

was still childish so even though she hated Ouyang Ke's despicable behavior, she also wanted to know whether this girlish and bashful Cheng Da Xiaojie would follow his order or not.

"What's the big deal about taking off all your clothes?" Ouyang Ke said with a laugh, "Did you wear anything when you came out of your mother's belly? Do you want your pride or his life?"

Cheng Yaojia hesitated a moment, then with a sad voice said, "Just kill him!"

Ouyang Ke did not expect she would say such thing; he was slightly startled, but then he saw she lifted her sword horizontally across her own neck. Hastily he waved his hand, sending out a 'tou gu ding' [bone penetrating nail]. 'Clank!' her sword fell down to the ground.

Cheng Yaojia was about to stoop down to pick her sword up when suddenly she heard someone knocking the door, "Innkeeper, innkeeper!" someone called out. It was a woman's voice. Cheng Yaojia was delighted, "Someone's coming, things may change," she thought. She busily bent down to pick her sword and leaped to open the door.

There was a young woman wearing white standing outside the door, with a white cloth on her head and a dagger on her waist. Her face was thin and pallid, but it was obvious that she was a beautiful woman. Cheng Yaojia did not care what kind of person she was, she already considered her to be her liberator. "Please come in Miss," she quickly said.

That woman saw her exquisite clothes and adornment, her sweet and pretty face, also a sword in her hand; never in her wildest dream would she expect a desolate inn in this rural village like this would have this kind of innkeeper. She

was dumbstruck. "I have two coffins outside, may I bring them in?" she asked.

If it were an ordinary house, the coffins may never enter in; but an inn was different. Besides, Cheng Yaojia was hoping she would come in quickly. She would not care if it was a hundred or even a thousand coffins, let alone only two coffins. She busily said, "Wonderful, wonderful!"

That young woman was taken aback, she thought, "What's so wonderful about coffins going into an inn?" She beckoned outside and eight porters carrying two black coffins came into the inn.

That young woman turned her head and was surprised to see Ouyang Ke. With a 'qiang lang' sound she unsheathed the dagger on her waist.

Ouyang Ke laughed a big laugh and said, "The heaven has destined us to be together. You can run away, but you cannot escape your fate. It has delivered us good fortune, so we commit a great sin if we do not enjoy this blessing."

This young woman was precisely Mu Nianci who was once captured by Ouyang Ke. After she broke off with Yang Kang at Baoying she cut her hair in grief, completely discouraged. Then she remembered there was one thing on earth she had to take care, thereupon she rushed back to the capital to fetch Yang Tiexin's, husband and wife, bodies and brought them to the south. She wanted to bury her adopted father and mother at their hometown, the Ox Village of Lin'an; and then she was going to leave home and become a Buddhist nun.

At that time the Mongolian army was launching a large scale attack against the capital, they laid siege around the city. As a single woman traveling with two coffins in the turmoil and chaos of war, she experienced untold

hardships, until finally she arrived at her adopted parents' hometown. She had left home since she was five years old, and had never been to the Ox Village before. As she saw Shagu's inn she was thinking of stopping by for some food and directions; who would have thought that she came across Ouyang Ke here.

At this time she did not know whether this beautiful woman wearing exquisite gown was her captor's accomplice or not; when Cheng Yaojia was taken prisoner by Ouyang Ke, Mu Nianci was already hidden away inside the empty coffin. These two women had never met each other, so Mu Nianci thought Cheng Yaojia was one of Ouyang Ke's concubines. She chopped her dagger toward Cheng Yaojia, then darting toward the door trying to escape. She heard the rustling noise of a clothes, someone was leaping over her head. Mu Nianci lifted her dagger up, Ouyang Ke's body was still midair, his right hand's index finger and thumb pinched the back of her dagger and pulled it away, while his left hand grabbed her wrist. Mu Nianci was forced to let her dagger go; her body leaped up and two people fell together on the doorway, halfway above the coffin.

"Aiyo!" the four porters cried out in alarm. The coffin fell to the ground, pinching five, six of the porters' eight feet.

Ouyang Ke's left hand embraced Mu Nianci in his bosom, while his right hand stabbed the dagger randomly toward the back of those four porters. The porters screamed in terror and scrambled anxiously over the coffin to run away. The other four porters also dropped their coffin and ran outside the inn; without asking for their money.

Lu Guanying tumbled down as he was free from the enemy's hand. Cheng Yaojia rushed over to help him up. She was totally ignorant of what was going on around her; her mind was set on how to get away from the enemy. With

Mu Nianci in his left hand and Ouyang Ke pushed the coffin with his right hand, and leaped back to the table. He snatched Cheng Yaojia's belt and very soon she was also embraced at the crook of his right arm. Ouyang Ke sealed both women's acupoints and sat on a bench. He laughed and called out, "Huang Meizi, you have to come over here too!"

While he was feeling smug, a shadow flashed in from outside; a young gentleman came in. It was Yang Kang. After he went out from underneath Huang Yaoshi's legs along with Wanyan Honglie, Peng Lianhu and the others, they ran away out of the Ox Village. Everybody was angry at the humiliation they had just received; they hung their heads low and nobody said anything. Yang Kang thought if he wanted to seek revenge, he must find Ouyang Feng first, who had not returned from stealing the book in the imperial palace. Thereupon he asked for Wanyan Honglie's permission and went back alone, waiting in the forest just outside the village.

That night Zhou Botong, Ouyang Feng and Huang Yaoshi three people came and go in a flash. With Yang Kang's current skill level, he could not even see them clearly. Early the next morning he saw Mu Nianci bringing the coffins into the village. His heart pounded from excitement and he followed behind her quietly. He saw her enter the inn, and then saw the porters running away, he felt strange, so he peeked through a crack on the door and did not see Huang Yaoshi inside; but he saw Mu Nianci was embraced by Ouyang Ke in a frivolous way.

Ouyang Ke saw him come in, he called out, "Xiao Wangye [Young Prince], you came back!" Yang Kang nodded. Ouyang Ke saw his face looked unusual, he tried to console him, "In the past Han Xin had also received humiliation by crawling underneath someone else's crotch. But a real great man can be bent and can be stretched. It was

nothing. Just wait for my uncle, then you can extract your revenge.”

Again Yang Kang nodded his head. His gaze was fixed on Mu Nianci.

Ouyang Ke smiled and said, “Young Prince, what do you think of my two beautiful women?” Yang Kang nodded again. Ouyang Ke was not present when Mu Nianci and Yang Kang were jousting to find a spouse on the street of the capital; therefore, he did not know that these two had a deep relationship between them.

At first Yang Kang did not think much of Mu Nianci, and then afterwards he saw how much she was passionately devoted to him; his heart could not help but be moved by her love, hence he promised to marry her. Right now he saw Ouyang Ke was hugging her, his heart swelled with hatred, but he maintained his composure.

“There was a wedding in here last night,” Ouyang Ke said with a smile, “There is some wine and chicken in the kitchen. Xiao Wangye, I’d like to bother you to fetch the food, I want to drink with you several cups. I am going to tell these two beautiful women to strip and dance to accompany your drinking.”

“Nothing better than that,” Yang Kang replied with a smile.

To suddenly seeing Yang Kang, Mu Nianci was pleasantly surprised. But when Yang Kang did not pay her any attention, she was mad. Now she saw his frivolous expression as he was going to join Ouyang Ke in humiliating her, her heart turned icy cold. She was determined that as soon as her hands and feet were free, she would cut her own throat in the presence of this heartless fellow; and then she would forever be free from the anxieties of the world.

She watched him turn and go into the kitchen. He fetched the food and drink, then sat alongside Ouyang Ke. Ouyang Ke poured two cups of wine and held them up in front of Mu and Cheng two women's mouths and said with a smile, "Drink this wine first, it will help to make your dancing more interesting." The two women were very angry, but since their acupoints were sealed, they were unable to turn their heads away from the wine cups on their lips. Ouyang Ke managed to pour half a cup into their mouths.

"Mr. Ouyang," Yang Kang said, "I admire your martial art skill very much. Let me toast you one cup before we enjoy the dancing."

Ouyang Ke took the cup Yang Kang handed over; he drank it in one gulp, then casually he released the two women's acupoints, but he placed his hands on the acupoints on their backs. He smiled and said, "If you listen nicely to what I say, not only you won't get hurt, but I will make you happy!" He turned to Yang Kang and said, "Xiao Wangye, which one of these young girls do you like? I'll let you choose first!"

Yang Kang slightly smiled and said, "Thank you very much!"

Mu Nianci pointed toward the two coffins on the doorsteps and imposingly said, "Yang Kang! Do you know whose coffins are those?"

Yang Kang turned his head and saw on the first coffin there was a red piece of paper with this line of characters on it: 'da song yi shi yang tie xin ling jiu' [the bier of Yang Tiexin, a chivalrous warrior of the Great Song Dynasty]. His heart turned cold, but his face did not show anything. He said, "Mr. Ouyang, can you hold them closely for me? I want to see which one has the smaller feet. I am going to choose her."



Ouyang Ke laughed and said, "Xiao Wangye is truly smart! I think this one's feet are smaller." While saying that he rubbed Cheng Yaojia's chin before continuing, "I have a special skill. I only need to look at a girl's face to know what her body looks like, from top to bottom."

Yang Kang laughed, "Amazing! I am impressed! What if I bow to you and take you as my master? Then you'll teach me this special trick." While saying that he bent down under the table.

Mu and Cheng both women had decided that as soon as he touched their feet, they would kick his 'tai yang' [sun] acupoint on his temple. Yang Kang smiled and said, "Mr. Ouyang, drink another cup of wine, then I'll tell you if your guess is correct."

"All right!" Ouyang Ke laughed, taking the cup with both hands. Yang Kang glanced upward from underneath the table, he saw Ouyang Ke was drinking the wine with his head thrown backward; suddenly he took a broken spearhead from his bosom. He sent all his strength to his arm, from his arm to his wrist, lunged it forward and 'Stab!' the spearhead went five, six inches deep into Ouyang Ke's abdomen. Immediately he somersaulted backward behind the table.

It was such a sudden change that Huang Rong, Mu Nianci, Lu Guanying and Cheng Yaojia were all startled. They only knew something changed, but nobody saw what happened under the table. Ouyang Ke raised his arms and pushed Mu and Cheng two women, they fell under the bench; and then he threw the wine cup in his hand out. Yang Kang ducked to evade and 'crash!' that cup hit the ground and turned into thousands of pieces; indicating the power behind that throw must be astonishing.

Yang Kang rolled on the ground, trying to escape to the door. Unfortunately the door was blocked by the coffins. He turned his head to see Ouyang Ke was standing on his hands on the bench, his body bent forward, his face looked like he was smiling yet he was not smiling, his eyes were staring at him with a weird expression. Yang Kang shuddered involuntarily. He wanted very bad to run away, but because of Ouyang Ke's stare, his body stiffened like a corpse, he could not move.

Ouyang Ke looked upward with a laughter and said, "I, the one surnamed Ouyang, have been roaming the world for half of my lifetime; unexpectedly I have to die under this kid's hands. One thing I don't understand, Xiao Wangye, why did you kill me?"

Yang Kang moved his legs and leaped up; he wanted to escape outside the door before answering his question. While his body was still midair, suddenly he felt a gust of wind behind his back; the back of his neck was grabbed by a steel-hook hand. He was unable to continue his leap and was forced to land on the coffin, along with Ouyang Ke next to him.

Ouyang Ke said, "You are not willing to talk, do you want me to die with my eyes open?"

The acupoint on the back of Yang Kang's neck was grabbed by Ouyang Ke; he could not move his limbs. He knew he would not escape alive, he laughed coldly and said, "All right, I'll tell you. Do you know who she is?" While saying that he pointed his finger toward Mu Nianci.

Ouyang Ke turned his head and saw Mu Nianci with a dagger in her hand, ready to pounce forward to help, but she was afraid she might hurt Yang Kang; her expression was full of concerns, exactly like what Cheng Yaojia showed

toward Lu Guanying. Suddenly it dawned on Ouyang Ke. He laughed and said, "She ... she ..." his words were cut short by coughing.

Yang Kang said, "She is my fiancée; twice you have bullied her. How can I let you go?"

Ouyang Ke said with a smile, "So that's how it is. We are going to hell together!" Raising his hand high his palm was ready to strike the top of Yang Kang's head.

Mu Nianci cried out in alarm, she rushed forward to save him, but it was too late. Yang Kang closed his eyes ready to die; he waited for Ouyang Ke's palm to strike down; who would have thought that after waiting for a while there was nothing moving above his head. He opened his eyes and saw Ouyang Ke was still smiling with his hand still high in the air, but his left hand, which grabbed Yang Kang's neck, was actually relaxed. Hastily Yang Kang struggled free and leaped away. Ouyang Ke tumbled down on top of the coffin, his breathing had ceased.

After staring blankly for half a day, Yang Kang and Mu Nianci rushed to each other and held each other's hands. They had countless words to say to each other, but neither one knew where to start. They both looked at Ouyang Ke's body and still felt fear in their hearts.

Cheng Yaojia helped Lu Guanying up and unsealed his acupoints. Lu Guanying knew that Yang Kang was a Jin's envoy. Even though he killed Ouyang Ke, thus Lu Guanying was indebted to him, he could not make an enemy his friend, so he simply cupped his fists in respect, then without saying anything he took Cheng Yaojia's hand and they both went away. These two people had just undergone a thrilling experience, escaping a life and death situation; they

completely forgot about seeing Guo Jing and Huang Rong earlier.

Huang Rong was very happy to see Yang Kang and Mu Nianci were back together; she also appreciated the fact that Yang Kang saved Mu Nianci from a possible disaster. Guo Jing also hoped that his sworn brother would change for the good. He exchanged a glance with Huang Rong, both of them broke into smiles.

They heard Mu Nianci say, "I have brought back your father and mother's bodies."

Yang Kang said, "Actually it was my responsibility. I have bothered Meizi so much."

Mu Nianci did not want to bring up past events; she simply discussed with him how to bury Yang Tiexin husband and wife. Yang Kang pulled the broken spearhead from Ouyang Ke's abdomen and said, "We have to bury him quickly. If his uncle finds out, even if the world is big, there will be no place for us to hide." Two people immediately buried Ouyang Ke's body in the backyard of the inn; and then went to the village to hire some people to help them carry the coffins and buried them in the backyard of Yang family's former home. Yang Tiexin had left his home for a long time that everybody who knew him had died. Nobody asked them anything.

By the time they finished burying their dead, the sky had already turned dark. That night Mu Nianci slept at a villager's house, while Yang Kang spent the night in the inn.

Early morning the following day Mu Nianci went back to the inn, she was going to ask him what he wanted to do next. She saw him pacing back and forth in the inn, stomping his feet and complaining bitterly. She asked him what happened and Yang Kang said, "I was so muddle-

headed to let those two people leave yesterday. I should have killed them to close their mouths. Now that they are gone, where can we find them?"

"Why?" Mu Nianci was surprised.

Yang Kang said, "If this fact that I killed Ouyang Ke ever leaks out, won't that be a disaster?"

Mu Nianci knitted her brows in displeasure. "A real man is not afraid to take responsibility of his actions," she said, "If you are afraid, you shouldn't have killed him yesterday."

Yang Kang did not say anything, he was busy thinking how to pursue and kill Lu and Cheng two people to close their mouths.

Mu Nianci said, "Even though his uncle is very fierce, we can run away to some far away place, he won't be able to find us."

Yang Kang said, "Meizi [sister/loved one], I have another thought: his uncle's martial art is unparalleled, I want to take him as my master."

"Ah!" Mu Nianci exclaimed.

"I have had this thought for a while," Yang Kang continued, "But they follow a very strict rule: they only take one disciple per generation. Now that this man is dead, his uncle might take me as his disciple!" He sounded very proud of himself.

Hearing his words and looking at his expression, Mu Nianci's heart turned cold. With a trembling voice she said, "It turns out the reason you killed him yesterday was not to rescue me at all, but you have another agenda in your mind."

Yang Kang laughed and said, "You are overly skeptical; for you, even if my body is crushed to dust and my bones smashed up to pieces, I am most willing."

"Let's talk about that later," Mu Nianci said, "Right now, what are you going to do? Are you willing to be a loyal patriot for the Great Song; or do you still want to seek unlimited riches and honor, acknowledging an enemy as your father?"

Looking at her beautiful face and smart appearance Yang Kang was silently full of admiration, but listening to her talk exposing the content of his heart he was not pleased at all. "Riches and honor? Humph," he said, "What riches and honor do I have? The Great Jin's capital has fallen to the Mongolian army. The Jins were defeated every time they went out to battle. The fall of Jin country is the present disaster we are facing."

The more Mu Nianci listened to him, the more displeased she became. "The defeat of the Jins is precisely what we are earnestly wished for," she said with a stern voice, "Yet you actually feel sorry for them. Humph, what if the fall of Jin country is the present disaster? Is the Jin country your country? This ... this ..."

"Why are we talking about other people's business?" Yang Kang cut her off, "I have been bitterly missing you since you left me." Slowly he went over to grab her right hand. Mu Nianci could hear the tenderness in his voice, her heart softened; she let him pull her hand gently, without struggling she followed him, her face was slightly blushing.

Yang Kang's left arm was about to embrace her shoulder when suddenly they heard bird cries high in the air; it was very loud and clear. They looked up and saw a pair of big white eagles spreading their wings flying across the sky.

Yang Kang had seen this pair of eagles that day when Wanyan Honglie led a team of soldiers to pursue and kill Tuolei, and he knew that later on Huang Rong took the eagles away. "How did the white eagles come to this place?" he thought. He pulled Mu Nianci's hand and hurriedly walked outside. He saw the pair of eagles fly in circles overhead, while a young girl was sitting on a steed's back by the big tree outside; she was looking at a distance. That young girl was wearing a pair of leather boots, with a horse whip in her hand. She was wearing Mongolian attire, with a long bow on her back and a quiver full of arrows hanging on her waist.

The eagles circled overhead for a while, then they flew along the road. A moment later they flew back. And then sound of hoof beats was heard coming from the road, a number of horse riders came speeding by.

Yang Kang thought, "Apparently this pair of eagles is to lead the way so that these people can meet with this Mongolian girl." He saw dust rose on the road and three riders were coming fast toward them. A swishing sound was heard, an arrow shot out to the air, coming this direction. The Mongolian girl extracted a long arrow from her quiver, drew her bow and shot the arrow to the air. As the three riders heard the arrow, they called out in delight, and rushed their horses even faster.

That young girl urged her steed forward to approach the riders. As they were about three 'zhang's apart from each other, the girl and one of the rider shouted and jumped from their saddles toward each other; their hands met in the air and together they landed on the ground.

Yang Kang was secretly startled, "The Mongolians are very proficient in riding and shooting techniques; even a young

girl has this kind of ability. Is it a wonder that the Jins are defeated?"

Inside the secret room Guo Jing and Huang Rong also heard the birds' cry and the hoof beats coming near. After a moment they also heard several people talking and walking toward the inn. Guo Jing was pleasantly surprised, "How did she come over here? This is wonderful!" he thought.

Turned out the Mongolian girl was his fiancée, Huazheng; and the other three were Tuolei, Jebek and Borchu. Huang Rong did not understand one word of Huazheng's babbling of talking and laughing in Mongolians; while Guo Jing's face turned green one moment and white another moment. His delight was replaced with anxiety. "My heart already belongs Rong'er, so I can't marry her. But she has looked for me here. How can I break my promise? What should I do?" he thought in his heart.

With a low voice Huang Rong asked, "Jing Gege, who is this girl? What are they saying? Aren't you feeling well?"

Several times Guo Jing had meant to tell Huang Rong everything once and for all, but always each time the words were already on his lips, each time he swallowed them back. Now that Huang Rong asked him, he could not hide anymore. "She is the Mongolian's Great Khan, Genghis Khan's daughter. She is my fiancée."

Huang Rong was shocked; tears started welling up her eyes. "You ... you have a fiancée?" she asked, "Why have you never told me?"

That day when Qiu Chuji and the Six Freaks of Jiangnan discussed Guo Jing's engagement in the inn at the capital, the Six Freaks of Jiangnan did mention that Genghis Khan had betrothed his beloved daughter to Guo Jing, but at that time Huang Rong had not arrived outside the window yet;



therefore, she had not heard about it and all this time she was not aware about this engagement.

Guo Jing said, "Now and then I wanted to tell you, but I was afraid you won't be happy. Sometimes I did not remember this matter."

"She is your fiancée, how can you not remember?" Huang Rong asked.

Guo Jing was at a loss. "I don't know," he said, "In my heart I always regard her as my sister; we are like brother and sister. I don't even want to marry her."

Huang Rong raised her eyebrows in delight, "Why?" she asked.

Guo Jing replied, "The Great Khan decided this matter for me. At that time I was not unhappy, but I was not happy either. I only thought that the Great Khan's decision must be right. But now, Rong'er, how can I leave you to marry another?"

"What should we do then?" Huang Rong asked.

"I don't know," Guo Jing replied.

Huang Rong sighed and said, "As long as in your heart you are forever good to me, I don't care if you marry her." But a moment later she said, "However, if you marry her, I won't like another woman to be with you all day. Perhaps one day I won't be able to control my temper and make a hole in her chest with a sword, and then you will hate me. Enough talking about this, why don't you listen to them and tell me what they say."

Guo Jing pressed his ear to the small hole and heard Tuolei and Huazheng talk about what happened after they parted. It turned out that after Huang Rong and Guo Jing went

down to the sea, the white eagles flew around in the wind and the rain looking for their masters. There was no place on the ocean for them to set their feet on, so they had to fly back to the mainland. They remembered their old home in the north, hence they flew to find their other master.

Huazheng was astonished to see the white eagles came back. She saw a piece of cloth tied on the eagle's foot, with some Chinese characters carved on it. She took the cloth to some Han people in the army to translate. Turned out they were the 'in danger' two characters. Huazheng was concerned, so she went south immediately to investigate. By this time Genghis Khan was busy supervising the military expedition against the Jins; day after day the Mongolians engaged the Jins in fierce battles both inside and outside the Great Wall, so nobody stopped her when she expressed her intention to go to the south.

The eagles understood their master's intention, they flew ahead several hundred 'li's to look for Guo Jing, and went back every night. In so doing they arrived at Lin'an. Guo Jing had not been found, they came across Tuolei instead.

Tuolei was sent by his 'fu wang' [father king] on a diplomatic mission to Lin'an, to solicit cooperation from the Song Dynasty for a converging attack against the Jin country. But the Song ministers and officials were enjoying peace and prosperity in the southeast; they also were afraid of the Jin's army. They were thanking the heaven and the earth that the Jins did not attack them; how could they dare to pull a tiger's whisker? Therefore, they were very indifferent toward Tuolei; they placed him in the guest house and did not pay any attention to him anymore. Fortunately Wanyan Kang was captured by Lu, father and son, at Lake Tai; otherwise the Songs would have received the Jins' order and have Tuolei killed.

Later on came the news that the Mongolian army was moving fast and the Jin's capital of Yanjing fell. The ministers of the Song Dynasty changed their attitude immediately; now they treated Tuolei as the Fourth Prince this and the Fourth Prince that, flattered him to no end. They went as far as agreeing immediately to form an alliance to attack the Jins; they thought if they could seize the opportunity to defeat their enemy without too much effort, then why not?

Tuolei was not happy, but he still agreed to sign the bilateral agreement with the Southern Song Dynasty to attack the Jins. That day he returned to the north, the Song's ministers respectfully sent him off outside the city gate. Tuolei did not feel like performing perfunctory propriety, so he simply slapped his horse and left.

Just outside Lin'an he saw the white eagles; he thought Guo Jing must be around, who would have thought that it was his own sister. Huazheng asked, "Did you see Guo Jing Anda [Mongolian for 'sworn brother']?" Before Tuolei could answer they heard clamoring noise outside the door; the sound of armors and horses. It turned out it was the Song Dynasty's escort finally caught up with the Mongolian envoys.

Yang Kang was standing quietly at the door; he saw the Song troops were carrying a banner with these large characters written on it: 'Respectfully sending off the Mongolian Fourth Prince to return to the north.' He was unable to restrain having a disquieting thought, an extreme regret in his heart. Just dozens of days ago he was also a prince, an honorable envoy; today he was alone in the world and nobody paid him any attention. He had tasted riches and honor all his life, so it would be very difficult for him to throw away everything he held dear.

Mu Nianci watched him with a cold eye; she noticed his unusual expression. Although she did not know what he was thinking, but remembering that he had never forgotten the glory and splendor of being a part of the enemy, she was unable to restrain herself from feeling hurt.

The captain of the Song escort team went into the inn and respectfully appeared before Tuolei. He spoke with Tuolei for a moment before going back out and bark his order, "Go to every house and find out if there is someone surnamed Guo, Guo Jing, Guo Guanren [Master Guo - lit. government official] living in this village. If he doesn't, ask where did he move to?"

The soldiers complied with one voice and immediately spread out. Not too long afterwards from the village noises were heard of chicken scrambling and dogs running, men crying out and women screaming; for the soldiers did not find the information they were looking for, so they helped themselves to plunder sheep and other belongings. How else would they punish the villagers for not giving out the information they wanted?

Yang Kang's heart was stirred, "If the troops can seize this opportunity to plunder, why can't I seize this opportunity to befriend this Mongolians?" he thought, "I will accompany them returning to the north and kill him along the way; that won't be difficult. The Mongolian Great Khan will think it is the work of a Song man; hence the alliance between the Mongolia and the Song Dynasty will be broken. It will be a great advantage to the Jins." Once his mind was decided he told Mu Nianci, "Wait here for a moment." And in big strides he entered the inn.

The captain tried to stop him with a loud shout; holding up his hand in front of Yang Kang. Yang Kang lifted up his left

arm and tossed the captain away. The captain fell backward and for half a day did not crawl back up.

Tuolei and Huazheng were startled. By that time, Yang Kang had already arrived at the center of the room. He took the broken spearhead from his bosom and lifted it high above his head; respectfully placed that spearhead on the table, and then he knelt down in front of the table, wailing loudly, "Guo Jing, oh, Brother Guo, you died a miserable death. I surely must avenge your death, Guo Jing, oh, Brother Guo."

Tuolei brother and sister did not speak Chinese, but they heard him keep calling Guo Jing's name, they were astonished. By that time the captain was crawling up with great difficulty, hastily they told him to inquire.

Yang Kang was crying and talking, tears streaming down his cheeks, in between sobs he said, "I am Guo Jing's sworn brother, somebody killed Guo Dage [big brother] with this spearhead. That bastard is a Song Dynasty military officer; I think he received the Prime Minister Shi Miyuan's inciting."

As Tuolei and Huazheng, brother and sister, heard the captain translate what Yang Kang had said into Mongolian, it was as if they were struck by a thunder; they were speechless. Jebek and Borchu remembered their deep friendship with Guo Jing; the four of them wept and beat their chests. Yang Kang also brought up the fact that Guo Jing routed the Jin army at Baoying to save Tuolei and the others; hence Tuolei's suspicion was gone. They asked Yang Kang how Guo Jing died and who killed him. Yang Kang told them the killer was a Great Song's officer by the name of Duan Tiande, and that he knew this person's whereabouts, and that he was going to find him to seek revenge; it was a pity that Yang Kang was unable to do it without help, he was afraid this task would not be easy to accomplish. The

story just flowed out of Yang Kang's mouth like it was a true story.

In the other room Guo Jing heard everything clearly and he was frustrated. As Huazheng heard this story, she drew the dagger on her waist and was about to slash her own neck to commit suicide; but then she changed her mind and hacked the dagger into a table nearby. "I am not a human if I can't extract revenge for Guo Jing Anda!" she made a vow.

Yang Kang was very happy to see that his plan was halfway successful; he lowered his head and cried some more. Suddenly he saw the bamboo stick that Ouyang Ke snatched from Huang Rong's hand lying on the ground. It was deep green and clear like crystal, truly an unusual object; he knew it was an extraordinary stick, so he walked over and picked it up. Huang Rong was groaning inwardly, but she had no choice but to let him take it.

The troops came and delivered food and wine, but Tuolei and the others did not have any appetite. They urged Yang Kang to lead them to find Guo Jing's killer. Yang Kang nodded his head in compliance; he took the bamboo stick in his hand and walked to the door. He turned his head and called Mu Nianci to join them. Mu Nianci shook her head slightly. Yang Kang did not want to miss this good opportunity, their personal affair could wait, so he went out of the inn alone. Everybody else followed him.

Guo Jing said with a low voice, "Didn't he kill Duan Tiande at the Cloud Village a long time ago?"

Huang Rong shook her head, "I don't understand it myself. Wasn't it he who stab you with a dagger? This man is very sly, his thoughts are unpredictable."

Suddenly outside the door there was someone reciting loudly, "Roaming to and fro, free without limitation; heart is

free from greed, glorious body is free from disgrace! ... Ah! Miss Mu, why are you here?" It was the Changchun Zi [Eternal Spring] Qiu Chuji.

Before Mu Nianci could reply, Yang Kang happened to be walking out of the inn. He saw his Shifu and his heart started thumping madly; this time they came face to face, there was no place he could hide, he had no choice but to kneel down and kowtow.

Next to Qiu Chuji stood several people; they were Danyang Zi [Scarlet Sun] Ma Yu, Yuyang Zi [Jade Sun] Wang Chuyi, Qing Jing San Ren [Sage of Tranquility] Sun Bu'er, as well as Qiu Chuji's disciple, Yin Zhiping. The previous day Yin Zhiping was beaten by Huang Yaoshi and he fell down and half the teeth in his mouth came off. Hastily he went to Lin'an to give report to his Shifu. Qiu Chuji was startled and angry; he wanted to go immediately to find Huang Yaoshi. Ma Yu strongly advised against his intention. Qiu Chuji said, "The Old Heretic Huang shared the same honor as our deceased master. Among us seven brothers and sister, only Wang Shi Di [younger martial brother] has seen his face at Mount Hua. Xiao Di [little younger brother] always admire him and wanted to see him long ago, I don't want to fight with him; why did Da Shige [first martial (older) brother] prevent me?"

Ma Yu said, "I heard Huang Yaoshi's temperament is strange, while your own temperament is brash and explosive; if you two meet, chances are that we won't have an amiable situation. He spared Zhiping's life, that means he is being lenient to us." However, Qiu Chuji was adamant in going, and Ma Yu did not have any way to persuade him not to. As it turned out, all Quanzhen Seven Masters happened to be in the vicinity of Lin'an; thereupon they were summoned and the next day they went to the Ox Village together.

All Quanzhen Seven Masters gathered together carried a strong power, but they fully realized Huang Yaoshi's ability, at the same time it was not clear whether he was a friend or a foe, therefore, they did not dare to be careless or indiscreet. Ma Yu, Qiu Chuji, Wang Chuyi, Sun Bu'er and Yin Zhiping, five people went into the village; while Tan Chuduan, Liu Chuxuan and Hao Datong waited outside the village, ready to help. Who would have thought that they did not see Huang Yaoshi, but saw Mu Nianci and Yang Kang instead.

Qiu Chuji only snorted seeing Yang Kang kowtow, and did not pay him any attention. Yin Zhiping said, "Shifu, the Master of the Peach Blossom Island bullied disciple in this inn." Initially he referred to Huang Yaoshi as the Old Heretic Huang [Huang Laoxie], but after being scolded by Ma Yu and the others he changed the way he called him.

In a loud and clear voice Qiu Chuji called out, "Quanzhen disciples Ma Yu and the others pay their respect to the Peach Blossom Island's Huang Daozhu [Island Master Huang]."

"There is no one inside," Yang Kang said.

Qiu Chuji stomped his foot and said, "What a pity, what a pity we can't see him!" Turning his head to Yang Kang he asked, "What are you doing here?"

Yang Kang was already scared to see his master and martial uncles, so he did not know what to say.

Huazheng had stared hard at Ma Yu for half a day, finally she rushed forward and called out, "Ah, you are the one who helped me capturing the eagles; you are the three-hair-bun Uncle. Look, those little eaglets have grown this big." She let out a loud whistle and the pair of eagles came down and perched on her left and right shoulders.



Ma Yu showed a faint smile, he nodded his head and said, "Are you going south to play?"

Huazheng cried and said, "Daozhang [Taoist Priest], somebody killed Guo Jing Anda. Please avenge his death."

Ma Yu jumped in fright; he translated what he just heard into Chinese. Qiu Chuji and Wang Chuyi were shocked; busily they asked further information. Huazheng pointed her finger toward Yang Kang and said, "He saw it with his own eyes; ask him what happened."

As Yang Kang found out that Huazheng knew his Da Shibo [first martial (older) uncle], he was afraid that if they talked too much their suspicion would be aroused; and then his plan to swindle these Mongolians without any effort would be thwarted. However, he could not talk irresponsibly toward his master and martial uncles, so he told Tuolei and Huazheng, "You go ahead and wait for me for a moment, I need to talk to these priests and then I'll come along immediately." Tuolei listened to the captain's translation, he nodded his head, then led everybody to leave the village and going to the north.

"Who killed Guo Jing?" Qiu Chuji asked with a stern voice, "Tell us, quick!"

Yang Kang considered his answer carefully, he thought, "Guo Jing was clearly killed by me; whom should I accuse?" He was undecided for a moment before he remembered, "I'd better mention someone with a high level of martial art; let Shifu find him and thus delivering his own life, then I won't have any more problem in the future." Thereupon with hatred in his voice he said, "It was the Peach Blossom Island's Huang Daozhu."

The Quanzhen Seven Masters had known early on that Huang Yaoshi wanted to pursue and kill the Six Freaks of

Jiangnan, so it made perfect sense if Guo Jing died under his hands; they did not have the least bit of suspicion. Qiu Chuji cursed the Old Heretic Huang as the most evil person, and he vowed not to rest before dealing with him. Ma Yu and Wang Chuyi were very depressed, so they could not say anything.

Suddenly from a distant came the voice of laughter, followed by someone whose voice was like a broken cymbal, finally there was someone shouting in a soft voice; although the sound was low, it was heard clearly. Three different voices went around the outskirts of the village; and then suddenly it was as if they came from a faraway place.

Ma Yu was pleasantly surprised, "That laughter sounds like Zhou Shishu; he is still alive!" He heard three whistles from the east side of the village, going farther and farther away.

"Three Shige already give chase," Sun Bu'er said.

Wang Chuyi said, "Listen to that broken cymbal sound and that soft shout; it seems like they are chasing Zhou Shishu."

Ma Yu was worried, "Those two people's martial art skills are not below Zhou Shishu's; I wonder which experts are they? Zhou Shishu is facing two enemies, I am afraid ..." He shook his head.

All Quanzhen four masters leaned their heads to listen for half a day, until the sounds were gone. They knew those people had already several 'li's away, so it was useless to pursue them.

Sun Bu'er said, "If Tan Shige and the others manage to catch up and render their assistance, Zhou Shishu does not have to worry."

"I am afraid they cannot overtake them," Qiu Chuji said, "It would be best if Zhou Shishu knew we are here and run to this village."

Huang Rong found their reckless surmise ridiculous to hear, she thought, "My father and the Old Poison are competing leg strength with the Old Urchin; they are not fighting. If they were, and you – a bunch of stinky ox noses [derogatory term for Taoist priest] – want to help, do you think you are my father's and the Old Poison's match?" She had just heard how Qiu Chuji was cursing her father, she was not happy; while she did not mind too much that Yang Kang brought a false charge against her father as Guo Jing's killer, because Guo Jing was in good condition and was sitting right next to her.

Ma Yu waved his hand and everybody went into the inn to sit down. Qiu Chuji said, "Hey, are you now called Wanyan Kang, or is it Yang Kang?"

Yang Kang saw his master's eyes were glittering brightly, looking at him with a penetrating gaze, his face looked grim; he knew if he gave one bad answer, it would be difficult for him to keep his life. He busily said, "If not because of Shifu, Ma Shibo and Wang Shishu giving me directions, disciple still would have been in the dark today, regarding an enemy for a father; so naturally disciple's surname is Yang. Last night disciple and Sister Mu here have just buried my deceased father and mother."

Hearing him saying so, Qiu Chuji was delighted; he nodded and his face turned softer. At first Wang Chuyi reprimanded Yang Kang for jousting against Mu Nianci but not wanting to marry her; but now he saw these two people together he thought the two of them had sorted things out, his indignation toward Yang Kang vanished.

Yang Kang took out the broken spearhead with which he killed Ouyang Ke and said, "This is what's left of my deceased father's belongings; disciple always keep it with me."

Qiu Chuji took the spearhead and caressed it gently; his heart was filled with sorrow. He heaved a sigh and said, "Nineteen years ago, I came across your father and your Uncle Guo. Very quickly more than a dozen years have passed, two old friends have come back to the yellow earth. The two of them are dead, leaving me suffering on this earth. I was powerless to save your parents' lives; it has been my life-long regret."

In the other room Guo Jing heard Qiu Chuji fondly remember his own father, he was grieved. "Qiu Daozhang [Taoist Priest] still remembers his friendship with my father, but I have never seen my father's face. Brother Yang was able to meet with his father, he is luckier than I am."

Qiu Chuji then asked how Huang Yaoshi killed Guo Jing, and Yang Kang opened his mouth making up some stories. Qiu, Ma and Wang three people had known Guo Jing for a long time; they sighed incessantly. After talking for a while Yang Kang remembered he had to see Tuolei and Huazheng, his heart was restless.

Wang Chuyi looked at him, and then looked at Mu Nianci, "Have you two married?" he asked.

"Not yet," Yang Kang replied.

"You'd better get married soon," Wang Chuyi said, "Qiu Shige, why don't you make the decision for them? How do you think we should handle this matter?"

Huang Rong and Guo Jing looked at each other, they both thought, "Are we going to witness another wedding

tonight?" Huang Rong further thought, "Mu Jiejie [older sister] is hot-tempered, she is a lot different than that Cheng Da Xiaojie. Perhaps before she agrees to get married she would challenge that kid surnamed Yang for a martial art contest. Now that would be interesting to watch."

She heard Yang Kang delightfully reply, "I rely on Shifu to make the decision." But with a clear voice Mu Nianci said, "I have one condition you must fulfill; otherwise I won't comply."

Qiu Chuji showed a faint smile listening to her; he said, "All right, what is it? Miss, please say it."

Mu Nianci said, "My adoptive father was killed by that traitor Wanyan Honglie. Before we can get married, he has to avenge his father's death first."

Qiu Chuji clapped his hands and called out, "Hear, hear! Miss Mu has just said what's in this Old Priest's heart. Kang'er, don't you agree?"

Yang Kang was very hesitant; he pondered deeply how to answer. Suddenly from outside the door a rough throaty voice like a mute's hissing was heard, singing the 'lian hua luo' [fallen lotus flower], and then a high-pitched throaty voice called out, "Master, Lady, be merciful, spare this beggar some money."

Mu Nianci thought this voice was somewhat familiar, she turned her head and saw that two beggars stood at the doorstep; one fat, the other short and thin, so small that the fat one looked three times as big as he was. These two's postures were so unusual that even though it had been many years, Mu Nianci still remembered that when she was only thirteen she had tended their injuries. Hong Qigong was pleased that she had a good heart, for this reason he passed on some martial art to her for three days. She was

about to go out and greet them, but ever since those two beggars enter the room, their eyes had never left the bamboo stick in Yang Kang's hand. They looked at each other and nodded their heads, then they walked toward Yang Kang, cupped their hands in front of their chests and bowed respectfully.

Ma Yu and the others noticed the two beggars' steps and body movement, they knew these beggars were not weak; they also noticed that each beggar carried eight coarse sacks on their backs; therefore, these two were the Eight-Bag Disciple of the Beggars Clan. Their positions were very high, but they were this respectful toward Yang Kang; Ma Yu and the others did not understand.

The thin beggar said, "I heard the brethrens say that some people in Lin'an City saw the Clan Leader's Stick. We went everywhere to investigate, and are fortunate to see it here. I wonder where did the Clan Leader go begging?"

Although Yang Kang took the bamboo stick, actually he did not know the stick's origin. Listening to this beggar's words he did not know how to respond, so he simply uttered an 'Hmm.' There was a custom in the Beggars Clan that seeing the Dog Beating Stick was the same as seeing the Clan Leader himself; so even though Yang Kang did not pay any attention to them, they still looked respectful and cautious.

The fat beggar said, "The assembly at Yuezhou is getting closer; from the east Elders Lu and Jian have headed west seven days ago."

Yang Kang become more and more confused, he uttered another 'Hmm.' The thin beggar continued, "In order to look for the Clan Leader's Stick, disciples have been delayed for several days; so we must hurry along

immediately. If Your Excellency decides to leave today, let disciples accompany and take care of you along the way.”

Yang Kang was inwardly excited, he had been trying to find a way to leave his Shifu; without caring what the beggars said, he wanted to grab this opportunity. Thereupon he prostrated himself in front of Ma Yu, Qiu Chuji and the others and said, “Disciple has some important matter to attend, I cannot accompany Shifu much longer. Please forgive me for taking my leave.”

Ma Yu and the others thought that Yang Kang must have some important connection with the Beggar Clan. The Beggar Clan was the largest organization in the world. The Clan Leader Hong Qigong was a martial art expert who shared the same reputation with their deceased master, Wang Zhenren; therefore, clearly they could not detain Yang Kang. Out of respect to the two beggars, they felt it was inappropriate to ask more questions, so they simply paid their respects according to the Jianghu custom.

The two beggars had always admired the Quanzhen Seven Masters; knowing they were Yang Kang’s masters, they were more modest, kept referring themselves as ‘wan bei’ [juniors]. Mu Nianci talked about past events, the two beggars became more affectionate. Since she already had some connection with the Beggar Clan, she was also invited to the Yuezhou assembly. Mu Nianci wanted very much to travel with Yang Kang, so she immediately nodded her head.

Qiu Chuji was originally very angry with Yang Kang and wanted to cripple him to take his martial art skill away, but remembering the deceased Yang Tiexin he did not have the heart to do so. Now, first, he saw that Yang Kang treated Mu Nianci in an intimate manner, that simple ‘joust to find a spouse’ affair turned out good after all; second, Yang Kang

seemed to learn good lesson from life experiences, he was willing to forfeit riches and honor, took the surname Yang as his own, so Qiu Chuji's loving care in teaching and giving him guidance was not in vain; third, these two high-level Beggar Clan disciple seemed to respect him very much, it certainly would bring glory and honor to the Quanzhen Sect. Therefore, the fury in his heart was replaced immediately into delight. He gently twirled the end of his long moustache and watched Yang and Mu two people's backs with a smile on his face.

That very evening Ma Yu and the others slept in the inn, waiting for Tan Chuduan three people to return. But all day the next day they did not hear anything about them; four people started to get anxious. Near midnight they heard a long whistle from outside the village. "Hao Shige came back!" Sun Bu'er said. Ma Yu returned the call with a low whistle. Not too long afterwards a shadow flashed by the door and Hao Datong flew in.

Huang Rong had never seen this person, she pressed her eye into the small hole to take a look. It was the fifth day of the seventh month, the crescent moon shone its light through the window opening. Under the moonlight she saw this man was big and tall, his appearance looked like that of a government official. His Taoist robe had short sleeves, stopped at the elbow; it looked different than the ones Ma Yu and the others wore. Turned out before he became a priest he was a head of Shandong's Ninghai sub-prefecture's rich family; highly educated, even managed to sell his divination skill. Later on he bowed to Wang Chongyang at the 'yan xia dong' [smoky red clouds cave] and took him as his master. Wang Chongyang took out his own robe, cut the sleeves and gave the robe to Hao Datong; saying, "Don't worry that it is without sleeves, you will complete it yourself."



The word 'xiu' [sleeve] was similar to the word 'shou' [to teach/to instruct/to award/to give]; the meaning was, no matter how much the master gives instructions, there will always be more to learn; whether the disciple enlightened or not, it depends on his own comprehension. He remembered his Master's kindness very well, so afterwards he always wore the half-sleeved Taoist robe.

Qiu Chuji was the most impatient, "How is Zhou Shishu?" he asked, "Is he playing around with others, or is he fighting them?"

Hao Datong shook his head. "I am ashamed," he said, "Xiao Di's [little brother] skill is superficial, I only managed to pursue them for seven, eight 'li's before Zhou Shishu's and the others' shadows disappeared. Tan Shige and Liu Shige were still ahead of Xiao Di. Xiao Di was powerless; I tried to look for them one whole day and one whole night but did not have the slightest clue on where they were."

Ma Yu nodded his head, "Hao Shidi [younger martial brother] is tired. Sit down and take some rest." Hao Datong sat cross-legged. He circulated his 'qi' around his body one time, then he said, "On my way back at the 'zhou wang miao' [Temple of King Zhou (dynasty)] Xiao Di saw six people. Their appearance matches Qiu Shige's description of the Six Freaks of Jiangnan. Thus Xiao Di came over to talk with them, and indeed it was them."

Qiu Chuji was delighted, "The Six Freaks are very bold," he said, "They unexpectedly went to the Peach Blossom Island. No wonder we could not find them."

Hao Datong said, "The head of the Six Freaks, Ke Zhen'e, Ke Daxia [great hero Ke] said that they had an agreement to see Huang Yaoshi, therefore, they went to the Peach Blossom Island to keep their promise; who would have

thought that Huang Yaoshi was not on the island. They heard Xiao Di mention Qiu Shixiong and the others are here, they said they are going to pay us a visit a little later.”

Guo Jing heard that his six masters were well, his heart was greatly comforted. By this time he had trained for five days and five nights, most of his injury has been healed.

Toward the ninth hour [3-5pm] of the sixth day, from the east of the village came a long whistle. “Liu Shidi came back,” Qiu Chuji said. A short moment later they saw Liu Chuxuan, accompanied by an old man with white hair and white beard, walking toward the inn. That old man was wearing a yellow short robe, a pair of shoes made of coarse cloth on his feet, and a huge rush-leaf fan in his hand. He was talking and smiling while entering the inn. When he saw the Quanzhen Five Masters he simply nodded his head slightly, as if he did not regard them too highly.

Liu Chuxuan said, “This is ‘tie zhang shui shang piao’ [iron palm floating above the water], Qiu Lao Qian Bei [Senior Qiu]. It is truly our good fortune to see him today.”

Huang Rong heard this and almost burst out in laughter, she lightly bumped Guo Jing with her elbow. Guo Jing also thought it was funny. Both were thinking, “I want to see how else this old scoundrel will swindle people.”

Ma Yu, Qiu Chuji and the others had heard Qiu Qianren’s fame for a long time, they had a profound respect toward him, so they talked to him with utmost respect and caution. But Qiu Qianren kept bragging unguardedly. After talking for a while Qiu Chuji asked if he saw their Shishu Zhou Botong. Qiu Qianren replied, “The Old Urchin? He was killed by Huang Yaoshi.”

Everybody was shocked. Liu Chuxuan said, “How can it be? Just the day before yesterday Wan bei [junior] saw Zhou

Shishu; only he ran so very fast that I could not overtake him.” Qiu Qianren was confounded, he simply smiled without saying anything; his mind churning to find a good answer.

Qiu Chuji interrupted, “Liu Shidi, did you have a good look, the two people who chased Shishu are what kind of people?”

Liu Chuxuan said, “One was wearing a white robe, the other a dark green long gown. They ran really fast. Indistinctly I saw the one wearing green had a very queer facial appearance, almost like a corpse’s face.”

Qiu Qianren had seen Huang Yaoshi at the Cloud Village, he quickly opened his mouth, “That’s right! The one that killed the Old Urchin was this green-long-gown-wearing Huang Yaoshi. Other than him, who has the ability to do so? I was about to rush forward but I was one step too late. Ay! The Old Urchin died a miserable death.”

Tie Zhang Shui Shang Piao Qiu Qinren had a resounding reputation throughout the Wulin world; he was a senior with a high level of martial art skill. How would the Quanzhen Six Masters know that he was a blabbering mouth? Immediately they felt exceptional grief and indignation. Qiu Chuji slapped the tabletop so hard producing an earth-shattering noise; again he scolded Huang Yaoshi as a dog with head drenched in blood.

Huang Rong at the other room was very angry. She did not blame Qiu Qianren from spreading false rumor about her father, but she did blame Qiu Chuji for scolding her father repeatedly.

Liu Chuxuan said, “Tan Shige’s footwork is faster than mine, perhaps he saw how Shishu was killed.”

Sun Bu'er said, "Tan Shige has not come back till now, perhaps he also suffered harm under the old thief's hand ..." Speaking to this point her face turned miserable, she stopped talking immediately.

Qiu Chuji drew his sword and called out, "Let us go quickly to rescue and avenge people!"

Qiu Qianren was afraid they might meet Zhou Botong, he quickly said, "Huang Yaoshi is aware that you are all gathered here, he could look for you anytime. This Old Heretic Huang is so evil, the Old Man here cannot allow him to continue like this. I am going to find him; you wait for my good news in here."

Everybody revered him as the senior, it would be inappropriate to defy his word; also they were afraid they would miss Huang Yaoshi if they were out looking for him, it would certainly be better to wait here for the enemy to find them and conserve their energy at the same time. Thereupon they bowed to express their gratitude and sent Qiu Qianren off to the door.

Qiu Qianren stepped over the doorstep and turned around to wave his hand, "You don't have to send me off too far. Although that Old Heretic Huang is fierce, I have a way to deal with him. Watch this!" He drew the shining sharp sword from his waist and aimed it towards his own abdomen. "Hey!" with a grunt he thrust the sword in.

Everybody called out in alarm; they saw more than half of the three feet sword went into his stomach. Qiu Qianren smiled and said, "Any sharp weapon in the world won't injure me. Please don't panic. If I can't find the Old Heretic Huang and he comes to find you here, don't fight him, avoid getting injured. Just wait for me to deal with him."

Qiu Chuji said, "The enmity of Shishu, it is impossible for the disciples not to avenge it."

Qiu Qianren sighed and said, "That's fine too, this is fate. If you want to seek revenge, there is one thing you must remember."

Ma Yu said, "Please give us your direction, Senior."

Qiu Qianren's face turned serious, he said, "As soon as you see the Old Heretic Huang, kill him immediately. Don't bother talking to him; otherwise, this enmity will forever be difficult to avenge. Important! Very important!" As he finished speaking he turned around with the sword still stuck in his abdomen.

Everybody looked at each other in amazement. Ma Yu and the others had vast experience, yet they had never heard of a sharp sword entering the abdomen and nothing happening; they thought this man's skill must have reached a level beyond measure. They did not know that it was another trick of Qiu Qianren: that sword was actually consisted of three sections, as soon as a light force was applied to the tip of the blade the first and second sections would automatically retract into the third section, the sword edge went through a seam in the waistband, hence for the spectator at a distance it looked like the sharp edge was entering the body. He had been hired by Wanyan Honglie to incite enmities among the Jiangnan heroes and warriors, so that when the Jin army attacked to the south they would not be united to fight the invaders.

For the rest of the day the Quanzhen Six Masters were restless; they could not drink tea or eat their rice, they stayed awake until the midnight of the seventh day. They heard some faint whistles come from the north of the village, two people, one in front of the other, came swiftly to

the outside of the inn. Ma Yu, all six people were originally sitting cross-legged on the straw training their breathing exercises, because Yin Zhiping's skill was lower, he was sleeping. Hearing this noise they all jumped up immediately.

"The enemy is pursuing Tan Shidi," Ma Yu said, "All Shidis, be careful!"

Tonight was Guo Jing's last night to train and heal his injury. During these past seven days and nights not only his internal injury gradually healed, his external wound was also closing up, and both Huang Rong's and his own internal strength had enjoyed tremendous advancement. These last several hours would be very crucial to the entire healing process. Listening to Ma Yu, Huang Rong was very concerned. "If the incoming person is indeed Father, all Quanzhen Seven Masters will fight him immediately. I won't be able to come out and tell them the truth," she thought, "I am afraid the Quanzhen Seven Masters will be injured under Father's hand. I don't care much for Quanzhen Seven Masters, but Jing Gege has a close relationship with Ma Daozhang and the others. I know his character well; it would be difficult for him not to come out and help them. If he bravely steps forward, not only the entire exercise will be wasted, his life will also be in danger." Therefore, she quickly whispered in Guo Jing's ear, "Jing Gege, promise me that whatever happens, no matter what important incident, you must by all means not go out."

Guo Jing just barely nodded his head when the whistle had already arrived at the door.

"Tan Shige," Qiu Chuji called out, "Tian gang bei dou [lit. sky's stars north head - the Big Dipper constellation] formation!"

Hearing the 'tian gang bei dou' four characters Guo Jing's heart was stirred, he said to himself, "The 'bei dou da fa' [Big Dipper great method] is mentioned several times in the Nine Yin Manual as the foundation of learning the martial art. But the explanation of 'bei dou da fa' in the Manual is profoundly subtle, it was so difficult to understand. I wonder if Ma Daozhang and the others' 'tian gang bei dou' has anything to do with the 'bei dou da fa'. It's surely important to know." Busily he pressed his eye to the hole and looked out.

His eye was barely on the hole when he heard a loud 'bang!' the front door shook, and a Taoist priest flew in. But the priest's robe was lifted up, his left foot had already stepped over the threshold, suddenly he staggered back out of the door. It turned out the enemy had arrived behind him and had launched an attack.

Qiu Chuji and Wang Chuyi flew together towards the door, standing at the entrance their sleeves rose up and two palms struck together. 'Bang!' they collided with the enemy's palm. Qiu and Wang two people were forced two steps backward, the enemy also drew two steps back. Tan Chuduan took this opportunity to enter the room.

Under the moonlight his hair looked disheveled, with two traces of blood streaming down his face. The long sword in his right hand was only half of its original length, his overall appearance was a total wreck. As Tan Chuduan entered the room, without saying anything he sat down cross-legged. Ma Yu and the others also immediately sat in their respective positions.

From the darkness outside came a woman's gloomy voice calling out, "Tan Laodao [old Taoist], if I did not regard the face of your Shixiong Ma Yu, this old lady would have already delivered your life to the heaven early on. Why did

you lead the old lady to come over here? Who had just exchanged palm strength with me? Tell it to Mei Chaofeng."

In the stillness of the night listening to her owl-cry like voice, although it was the middle of summer, involuntarily a chill crept on everybody's back. As soon as she stopped talking the silence came back, outside the door the insects' buzz was heard clearly. A moment later a series of cracking noises were heard. Guo Jing knew the noise came from Mei Chaofeng's joints, in a moment she would start making her move.

Yet another moment someone was reciting softly, "Once one make a dwelling one can stay for several dozens years." Guo Jing recognized it was Ma Yu's voice, the intonation was really gentle and soothing. Tan Chuduan continued, "With disheveled hair walking all day long like crazy." His voice was straightforward and heroic. Guo Jing peeked outside and took a good look on the Second Master of the Quanzhen Seven Masters. He saw a muscular face with thick eyebrows and big eyes, his body looked big and sturdy. Before he became a priest Tan Chuduan was a blacksmith in Shandong. After he entered Quanzhen Sect, his title was Changzhen [Eternal Truth] Zi.

The third Taoist priest was thin and small, his face looked like a monkey; he was Changsheng [Eternal Life] Zi, Liu Chuxuan. He continued the recitation, "Chongyang Zi [from 'Wang Chongyang] underneath the 'hay tang ting' [ocean cherry-apple pavilion]." His stature might be small, but his voice was loud and clear.

Changchun [Eternal Spring (season, not water spring)] Zi Qiu Chuji opened his mouth, "Tai yi xian [I think he is a Taoist deity] in the lotus leaf boat." Followed by Yuyang [Jade Sun] Zi Wang Chuyi, "Nothing can get out of an empty shell." Guangning [Infinite Peace] Zi Hao Datong was next,



“There’s someone who can reach enlightenment before being born.” Lastly Qingjing Sanren [Sage of Tranquility] Sun Bu’er recited, “Leaving home with a smile without any obstruction.” Ma Yu concluded, “Cloud in the West Lake, moon in the sky!”

Mei Chaofeng listened to these seven recitations, each voice carried an abundant ‘qi’ in it, a sign of their deep internal energy. She was secretly shocked, “Are the Quanzhen Seven Masters really here this time? It can’t be. Other than Ma Yu, the others’ voices are not the same.”

On the peak of Mongolian desert cliff she had heard Ma Yu and the Six Freaks of Jiangnan pretending to be the Quanzhen Seven Masters talking to each other. Her eyes were blind, so she depended a lot on her extremely keen ears; her memory was also superb, once she heard anything, she would not forget it. She did not know that Ma Yu was deceiving her that day.

“Ma Daozhang, you must be well since our last meeting!” she said with a clear voice. She knew Ma Yu was showing her mercy the other day. Although she was vicious, she knew the good from evil. When Tan Chuduan could not overtake Zhou Botong he decided to return. On his way back he saw that Mei Chaofeng was using a living person to train her martial art. Being a man of chivalry and righteousness, he went forward to prevent evil; who would have thought that he was not her match. Fortunately Mei Chaofeng recognized him as a Quanzhen Sect priest. Out of her respect to Ma Yu she did not kill him, she only injured him and chased him away.

Ma Yu said, “I am very fortunate! Thank you! The Peach Blossom Island does not have any enmity with Quanzhen Sect. Is your honorable master coming soon?”

Mei Chaofeng was startled, "Are you expecting my Shifu?" she asked.

Qiu Chuji called out, "Witch! Quickly get your Shifu over here to experience Quanzhen Sect's real skill."

Mei Chaofeng was angry, "Who are you?" she called out.

"Qiu Chuji!" Qiu Chuji said, "Haven't you, the demon, heard my name?"

Mei Chaofeng cried out loudly, her body flew up to the direction of Qiu Chuji's voice. Her left palm was protecting herself, and her right claw striking downward.

Guo Jing knew that this pounce by Mei Chaofeng was swift and ruthlessly fierce, it was really difficult to block, although Qiu Chuji's martial art was good, he would not be able to take it head on. Who would have thought that he was still sitting cross-legged on the ground; he neither parried nor evaded.

"Not good!" Guo Jing shouted inwardly, "How can Qiu Daozhang be this bold?" He saw that Mei Chaofeng was about to grab the top of Qiu Chuji's head, suddenly two palm winds came from left and right; it was Liu Chuxuan and Wang Chuyi striking together. Mei Chaofeng's right claw continued to strike, while her left palm swept horizontally to block Liu and Wang two people's palm strikes. Who would have thought that these two palms were complementing each other, one 'yin' [negative], the other 'yang' [positive], the power, unexpectedly, was much stronger than the internal strengths of two people added together.

Mei Chaofeng felt this surge of power in midair; it was like a cannonball pushing her upward. Hastily she changed her right claw into a palm, striking downward then she flipped

her body backwards and landed on the threshold. She was unable to restrain her shock, thinking that these two people's skills were very profound, certainly above the Quanzhen Seven Masters. "Is Hong Qigong and Emperor Duan in here?" she called out.

Qiu Chuji said with a smile, "We are the Quanzhen Seven Masters. What Hong Qigong or Emperor Duan?"

Mei Chaofeng was puzzled, "Tan Laodao [old Taoist] was not my match; how come there is such an expert among his martial brothers? Could it be there is such a big difference in skill among them even though they came from the same school?"

Guo Jing in the other room was also puzzled; he thought that although Liu and Wang two people's martial art skill was higher, they were more or less in par with Mei Chaofeng or with her senior. Even if those two combined their forces, they would not be able to casually throw her out like that. Only Zhou Botong, Hong Qigong, Huang Yaoshi, Ouyang Feng, and other people of their caliber would have this kind of ability; how did the Quanzhen Seven Masters manage to do that?

Mei Chaofeng's temper was very bold; other than her own Shifu, she did not fear anybody in the world. The more she suffered setbacks, the more she would act recklessly. That day on the peak of the Mongolian's cliff Ma Yu was speaking to her amiably, treating her in good manners and let her go without giving her too much difficulty. But today Qiu Chuji believed Qiu Qianren's lies that Zhou Botong had been killed by Huang Yaoshi; he also believed Huang Yaoshi killed Guo Jing. His hatred toward the Peach Blossom Island went deep to his bones and marrows; he kept calling Mei Chaofeng 'yao fu' [lit. goblin/witch/devil/monster woman]. Mei Chaofeng knew perfectly well that her enemies were

not her match, but she was not willing to give up. She only hesitated for a moment before she reached into her waist to pull her 'du long bian' [poisonous dragon whip] out. "Ma Daozhang!" she called out, "I must offend you today!"

Ma Yu replied, "You flatter me!"

Mei Chaofeng said, "I am going to use my weapon. Unsheathe your swords!"

Wang Chuyi said, "There are seven of us while you are alone, plus your eyes cannot see a thing. Even if the Quanzhen Seven Masters are unworthy, we cannot use weapons against you. We will sit and not move; you can start!"

Mei Chaofeng coldly said, "Do you want to face my silver whip sitting motionless?"

Qiu Chuji scolded, "Witch, tonight you will lose your life, what more do you want to say?"

"Humph," Mei Chaofeng snorted. Her right hand flicked, the long whip full of hooks in her hand moved slowly like a big python straight toward Sun Bu'er.

In the other room Huang Rong listened their conversation; she knew how fierce Mei Chaofeng's 'du long bian' was, the Quanzhen Seven Masters went as far as daring to take the whip sitting motionless and barehanded, she wanted to know how they were going to do that. She pulled Guo Jing away from the hole and told him that she wanted to watch.

She saw the Quanzhen Seven Masters sat in a formation inside the room; it suddenly dawned on her, "This is the Big Dipper constellation! Hmm, right! Didn't Qiu Daozhang mention the Big Dipper formation?" Huang Yaoshi was proficient in astronomy and the study of calendar

calculation (almanac). When Huang Rong was small she often sat on her father's knees in a clear night, looking at celestial constellation, hence she immediately recognized the positions of the seven Taoist priests.

The Quanzhen Seven Masters' Ma Yu took the 'tian shu' [sky pivot] position, Tan Chuduan took the 'tian xuan' [sky jade/gem] position, Liu Chuxuan 'tian ji' [sky pearl], Qiu Chuji 'tian quan' [sky power/authority]. These four people formed the head of the constellation. Wang Chuyi took the 'yu heng' [jade (measuring) weight], Hao Datong the 'kai yang' [open sun], and Sun Bu'er 'yao guang' [shaking ray (of light)]. These three were the handle of the Big Dipper.

Among the seven stars of the Big Dippers, the light of the 'tian quan' was the darkest, but it was the link connecting the head with the handle. It was the most important position; hence it was occupied by the strongest among the Quanzhen Seven Masters, Qiu Chuji. Among the handle, 'yu heng' was the most important; hence it was taken by the second strongest Wang Chuyi.

Mei Chaofeng's 'du long bian' was moving toward Sun Bu'er's chest. It seemed slow but it was very fierce; who would have thought that the Daogu [Taoist priestess] was still sitting motionless. Huang Rong followed the movement of the tip of the whip and saw that there was a skull embroidered on Sun Bu'er's Taoist robe; she was secretly amazed. "Quanzhen Sect enjoys the reputation as a Taoist orthodox school, how come her clothing resembles something from Mei Shijie's pathway?" She did not know that when Wang Chongyang took Sun Bu'er as his disciple he drew a skull and gave it to her. His meaning was that somebody's life was short, that very quick death will come, and the person would change into a skull; so she must cultivate the true and admired 'way' ['Dao' of the Taoist

means 'the way']. In memory of her deceased master, Sun Bu'er embroidered this skull on her robe.

The 'yin bian' [silver whip] seemed to move slowly, yet it carried a gust of wind. The tip of the whip was only about several inches apart from the embroidered skull on her robe, suddenly with an abrupt movement the silver whip flew back, just like a python when its head was chopped with a knife, or like an arrow it flew straight back towards Mei Chaofeng. It was so strange and swift; Mei Chaofeng only felt that her hand was slightly shaken and the wind had already caressed her face. Quickly she ducked and the silver whip brushed through her hair. "Dangerous!" she cried out inwardly as she pulled the whip back and re-attacked. This time the whip was aimed toward Ma Yu and Qiu Chuji, who were still sitting motionless. Tan Chuduan and Wang Chuyi raised their palms and parried the whip away.

After they exchanged several stances Huang Rong was able to see clearly that the Quanzhen Seven Masters always parry the incoming attack with one palm, while the other palm was holding the shoulder of the person sitting right next to them. Huang Rong pondered deeply and it dawned on her, "It turned out that they are using the same method I use to help healing Jing Gege's injury. They are combining seven people's strength into one; how can Mei Shijie resist?"

The Big Dipper Formation was Quanzhen Sect's highest and most mysterious martial art, developed by Wang Chongyang with countless meticulous care. The main principle was combining forces in combat with a wide range of variations; it might even be used in the battlefield. When the enemy attacked, the one directly bearing the brunt did not need to exert any energy to resist; it was the companions on his/her flanks who would launch the

counterattack. It was as if one person with several people's martial art; the power was truly irresistible.

Several moves later Mei Chaofeng became increasingly panicked, since she realized that the enemy no longer fend the whip off and shake it away, but she felt the whip was being pulled and redirected so that the circle of the whip movement was decreasing, getting smaller and smaller. A short moment later as the several 'zhang's long silver whip was moving halfway toward the enemy, she could not pull it back anymore. If at this time she has let the whip go and jumped back, she might escape unharmed; but she had spent innumerable painstaking efforts in training with this long whip, how could she just sit quietly when the enemy was trying to snatch the whip away from her hand?

She hesitated only for a moment but her opportunity to escape was gone. Once the Big Dipper Formation started to move, all seven people moved swiftly as if they were one person, unstoppable unless by the person occupying the 'tian quan' position. By the time Mei Chaofeng realized her precarious situation, it was already too late for her to back off. The only thing she could do was clench her teeth, let go of the whip handle and stake it all.

Liu Chuxuan's palm made a pulling action, with a loud 'bang!' the whip flew and hit the wall, shaking the whole building; the roof tiles rattled loudly and dust and debris from the roof fell down to the ground. Mei Chaofeng staggered; she could not resist this pulling force and was forced one step forward.

Although this one step was only about two feet, it was crucial in determining victory or defeat. If Mei Chaofeng had let her whip go sooner, she would not be pulled forward and she could turn around and escape out the door; the Quanzhen Seven Masters might not necessarily pursue her,

because even if they did they might not necessarily be able to overtake her. But now that she had moved forward one step, she knew the situation was unfavorable to her; she wielded her palms to the left and right, and they happened to meet with Sun Bu'er and Wang Chuyi's palms. As she slightly added her palm strength, Ma Yu and Hao Datong's palms came striking from behind. She knew perfectly well that if she moved another step, her situation would become more dangerous; but under the circumstances, she had no choice so her left foot treaded half a step forward. At the same time with a loud shout her right foot flew up and successively kicked Ma Yu and Hao Datong's hands.

"Good skill!" Qiu Chuji and Liu Chuxuan cheered together, while simultaneously their palms struck, one from the front, the other from the back, to prevent her from continuing her attack. Before her right foot even landed, Mei Chaofeng's left foot flew up and like a flash kicking Qiu's and Liu's palms; but as her right foot landed she moved one more step forward. This way she went even deeper into the Big Dipper Formation; she will not be able to escape unless she managed to overthrow one out of seven people.

As she was watching the battle, Huang Rong's heart was secretly anxious. Under the pale yellow moonlight she saw Mei Chaofeng's long hair flutter in the air as she was leaping around and her palms striking, her feet kicking. Each hand and each foot carried a light wind, like a tiger leaping or a leopard flitting about.

The Quanzhen Seven Masters were still sitting cross-legged; when the head is struck the tail responded, when the tail is attacked the head responded, when the middle is struck the head and tail responded, while all the time keeping her firmly inside the formation.



Mei Chaofeng had successively used the 'jiu yin bai gu zhua' [nine yin white bone claw] and 'cui xin zhang' [devastating heart palm] trying to dash out of the tight encirclement; but every time she was forced to go back by the Seven Masters' palm strength. In her anxiety she let out a strange 'wah, wah' cry.

By this time if the Seven Masters wanted to take her life they would be able to do so without too much effort, but all along they had never launched a deathly strike. Huang Rong watched for half a day before she realized what was happening, "Ah, right! They are borrowing Mei Shijie to train this formation. It is not easy to find an opponent with her high level of martial art. I think they are going to weary her to death before they'll stop." Actually her guess was only half true; they were borrowing Mei Chaofeng to train their formation all right, but Taoism did not tolerate killing easily, therefore, they never had any intention to kill her.

Huang Rong did not have a favorable impression toward Mei Chaofeng, but seeing the Seven Masters humiliate her like this Huang Rong was seething with anger; so after watching for a moment longer she didn't want to watch anymore and gave the hole back to Guo Jing. She still, however, heard the gusts of wind in the other room sometimes intensifying and sometimes slowing down, a sign that the battle was still raging.

At first Guo Jing was puzzled to see the fight; he did not understand why the Seven Masters was fighting Mei Chaofeng by sitting in an irregular formation on the ground. Huang Rong whispered in his ear, "They are sitting according to the Big Dipper Constellation; seven people's internal strengths are connected to each other. Do you see it?"

It was like a reminder to Guo Jing; he remembered the second part of the Nine Yin Manual mentioned the Big Dipper quite often. He had memorized this part by heart, yet he did not understand its meaning. Looking at the Seven Masters launching palm attacks while sitting in a formation suddenly he understood what the Manual was talking about. The more he watched, the happier he became, finally he was unable to restrain his excitement and stood up.

Huang Rong was shocked and quickly pulled him back. Guo Jing shivered in fear and immediately sat down. He pressed his eye against the hole and watched the fight again. This time he more or less understood the essence of the Big Dipper Formation. Although he did not know how to use it, each move and every style the Seven Masters used was like showing him the trick of the trade mentioned in the Nine Yin Manual.

The Nine Yin Manual was the result of a martial art expert Senior's comprehension over ancient Taoist canon. Wang Chongyang developed this formation before he saw the Manual; however, the martial art study within Taoism came from the same root. The basic essence originally did not differ much; therefore, the variations within the formation were not far from the Manual's basic content.

The other time on the Peach Blossom Island Guo Jing had watched Hong Qigong fight Ouyang Feng and he had gained tremendous advantage. However, he was slow, plus the Northern Beggar's and the Western Poison's martial arts were not based on the Manual; therefore, his comprehension was somewhat limited. This time the Seven Masters' martial art and the position they assumed were based on the same Taoism essence with the Manual; everything seemed to fit perfectly and this time he truly gained great benefit.

He saw Mei Chaofeng was in a difficult situation, but the Seven Masters' palm strength was also gradually weakened. Suddenly he heard someone on the doorstep speak, "Yao Xiong, are you going to act first, or do you want Brother to try first?"

Guo Jing was startled, it was Ouyang Feng's voice; he did not know when he came in. The Seven Masters were also surprised to hear his voice; they turned their heads toward the door and saw two men standing side by side on the threshold, one was wearing dark green long robe, the other was dressed in white. They were the two people who chased Zhou Botong the other night.

The Quanzhen Seven Masters made a low whistling noise, stopped fighting, and stood up. Huang Yaoshi said, "What a fine sight! Seven mixed-up hairs [derogatory term for Taoist priests] join forces against my lone disciple. Feng Xiong, if I teach them some lessons, will you say I am bullying some juniors?"

Ouyang Feng said with a smile, "They were being rude to you first; if you do not show your skill, these juniors will not understand the Master of Peach Blossom Island's ability."

Wang Chuyi had seen the Eastern Heretic and the Western Poison at Mount Hua; he was going to step forward to pay his respect to them when suddenly Huang Yaoshi's shadow flashed and struck with the back of his palm. Wang Chuyi stepped back to evade, but he was too slow. 'Slap!' his cheek was squarely hit; he staggered and tumbled down.

Qiu Chuji was shocked, "Quickly return to position!" he called out; but 'Slap! Slap! Slap! Slap!' Tan, Liu, Hao and Sun four people were slapped by a palm. Qiu Chuji only saw a dark green shadow flashing by; a palm hacked down right in front of him, the palm shadow suddenly fluttered. Qiu

Chuji did not know where the attack would come from; desperately he raised his sleeve, striking toward Huang Yaoshi's chest.

Qiu Chuji's martial art was the chief among the Quanzhen Seven Masters; this strike was not a small matter. Huang Yaoshi had underestimated him a bit too much; unexpectedly he was struck by Qiu Chuji's sleeve and he felt pain on his chest. Hastily he retracted his hand to protect his chest; his left hand went up and grabbed the sleeve, his right hand moved fast toward Qiu Chuji's eyes. Qiu Chuji struggled with all his might and ripped his sleeve. At the same time Ma Yu's and Wang Chuyi's palms came to rescue him. Huang Yaoshi moved very fast; as soon as his strike to Qiu Chuji failed he leaped behind Hao Datong's back and raised his left leg. 'Bang!' he kicked Hao Datong, sending him rolling down on the ground.

This time Guo Jing let Huang Rong look through the small hole. She saw her father greatly demonstrate his invincible might, she was very happy. If she did not remember that Guo Jing still needed two to four hours to recover, she would have already jumped up and cheered.

Ouyang Feng loudly laughed and called out, "Wang Chongyang had accepted this group of rice buckets as his disciples!"

Ever since Qiu Chuji started learning martial art, he never suffered such a defeat. "Return to positions!" he repeatedly shouted. But Huang Yaoshi flashed to the east and swayed to the west, and in a short moment launched seven, eight deathly strikes. Everybody was having a hard time to parry, how could they return to their formation? A couple of 'crack! crack!' sounds was heard; Huang Yaoshi snapped Ma Yu's and Tan Chuduan's swords, he broke and tossed them to the ground.

Qiu Chuji's and Wang Chuyi's pair of swords continued to move upward with the Quanzhen Sect's subtle variations sword technique. As the pair of swords attacked together, their power increased exponentially. Huang Yaoshi did not dare to be negligent; with concentrated attention he launched several counterattacks. In the meantime Ma Yu took this opportunity to return into his 'tian shu' position while launching a palm attack at the same time, giving Tan, Liu and the others the opportunity to return to their respective positions.

As soon as this Big Dipper Formation was assembled, the battle situation changed. 'Tian quan' and 'yu heng' faced the enemy from the front; 'tian ji' and 'kai yang' sent out palm attacks from both sides, 'yao guang' and 'tian xuan' from the back circled to the front.

With four whooshing noise Huang Yaoshi sent out four palm attacks toward four people. "Feng Xiong," he laughed and said, "I did not know Wang Chongyang left behind this kind of skill!" His voice sounded effortless as his hands parried each opponent's palm attack, each one substantially different from the other. Each one of these seven people's attack carried an enormous power; it was incomparable to when they were fighting individually. Immediately Huang Yaoshi used his 'luo ying shen jian zhang fa' [falling (leaves) divine sword palm technique]; his body moved swiftly as if he was skating around randomly while his palms flew as if they were everywhere.

Huang Rong thought, "When Father taught me this 'luo ying shen jian zhang fa', I only know five voids one solid, or seven voids one solid; with the voids to distract the enemy. But I didn't know that these five voids and seven voids can be changed into solids." This amazing fight was certainly not the same as when the Seven Masters were fighting Mei Chaofeng earlier. Not only did Huang Rong watch the fight

with baited breath, Ouyang Feng with his level or martial art skill was also startled.

Mei Chaofeng was standing on the side, listening to the wind generated by the battle. She was both joyful and frightened on the inside. Suddenly she heard an 'Ah!' followed by a 'bang!'; turned out Yin Zhiping was watching eight people fight, he became dizzy as if the world was spinning around him; he saw many Huang Yaoshis moving around in front of him, his vision blurred and he fell backward, passed out.

The Quanzhen Seven Masters firmly held their positions, doing all they can to resist the enemy; they knew only one slight mistake was needed, and the seven of them would not live to see the day. Along with their demise, the Quanzhen Sect would see its fall. Huang Yaoshi was also groaning inwardly. If only he launched deathly attack a moment ago, he would be able to kill one or two enemies then the Big Dipper Formation would be broken. But because he had shown leniency he knew victory would not be achieved easily, while he simply must not lose. Both sides were like riding on a tiger's back; they could not back off easily. All they could do was fight with all their strengths.

Within less than two hours Huang Yaoshi had used thirteen different martial arts just to be even with the opponents. Eight people were inseparable until the dawn arrived, the roosters crowed and the sun started to cast its light into the room. By now Guo Jing had finished his seven days and seven nights training. Although the fight in the other room shook the sky and turned over the earth, his mind was very peaceful; his eyes closed, his internal energy was warming up his entire body, starting from his 'wei lu' [tail gate] going to his 'shen guan' [kidney pass], from his spine through both passes it ascended to 'tian zhu' [sky pillar] and 'yu zhen' [jade pillow]; finally to 'ni wan gong' [restrained pill

palace], at the top of his brain, paused for a moment and then pushed his tongue against his jaw. His inner breathing went down from his face, 'shen ting' [divine courtyard], to 'que qiao' [magpie bridge], and back again until it arrived at 'huang ting' [yellow courtyard], 'qi xue' [air pocket] and slowly down to his 'dan tian' [pubic region].

Huang Rong saw his face was ruddy and resplendent in divine brightness; her heart was overjoyed. She pressed her eyes against the small hole again to look outside and she was shocked. She saw her father's steps were sluggish; he moved according to the 'ba gua' [eight diagram]; while slowly launching palm attack by palm attack. She knew her father would not easily use this highest footwork technique. She knew that victory or defeat will soon be decided; it was a defining moment of life and death.

The Quanzhen Seven Masters were also fighting with all their might while shouting encouragement to each other. The top of their heads were emitting steaming mist, their robes were stuck to their sweating bodies. Their condition was totally different from when they were leisurely fighting Mei Chaofeng earlier.

Ouyang Feng was standing at the side with his sleeves down, looking intently at the Seven Masters' Big Dipper Formation. He was hoping that Huang Yaoshi would be exhausted and suffer a serious injury so that on the second Sword Meet of Mount Hua he would have one less powerful enemy. Who would have thought that Huang Yaoshi's martial art came out one after another; even though the Seven Masters were not defeated, it was obvious that they would not achieve victory easily either. "The Old Heretic Huang is really good!" he thought. He saw both sides moved slower and slower, a sign that the situation had become more critical than ever; in less than the time to drink a tea this battle would reach its conclusion.

Huang Yaoshi sent out two palm attacks toward Sun Bu'er and Tan Chuduan. They raised their hands to parry, while Liu Chuxuan and Ma Yu came to their rescue. Ouyang Feng let out a long whistle and called out, "Yao Xiong, let me help you." He squatted down and thrust both palms ferociously toward Tan Chuduan's back. Tan Chuduan was using all his power to fight Huang Yaoshi. Suddenly he felt an earth shattering force coming from behind with a lightning speed. Not only his martial brothers and sister did not have time to rescue, he also did not have time to evade. 'Bang!' his whole body was thrown forward.

"Who wants your help?" Huang Yaoshi roared angrily. Right at that moment Qiu Chuji's and Wang Chuyi's palms arrived together. He brushed his sleeve to neutralize those attacks, while his right palm blocked Ma Yu's and Hao Datong's palms.

Ouyang Feng laughed and said, "All right, let me help them then!" Suddenly his palms struck toward Huang Yaoshi's back. When he attacked Tan Chuduan, he was only using 30% of his strength, but now he was using all of his lifelong cultivated energy; taking the opportunity while Huang Yaoshi was busy blocking the attack of Four Masters. He wanted to strike Huang Yaoshi down in one blow. He had planned it carefully: he would kill one of the Seven Masters and then kill Huang Yaoshi. As soon as the Big Dipper Formation was broken, he would not be afraid of their revenge. This evil scheme of his was perfect; even if Huang Yaoshi's skill were higher he would not be able to resist Four Masters and Western Poison on his back all at once.

"I am finished!" Huang Yaoshi secretly sighed; he had no choice but to concentrate his 'qi' on his back, staking his all to receive the brunt of Ouyang Feng's Toad Stance attack. Ouyang Feng's push carried an enormous force, but the speed was slower. He was sure his plan would prevail, he



was secretly delighted. All of a sudden a dark shadow flashed by. Someone from the side flew toward Huang Yaoshi's back, receiving the hit with a loud shout.

Huang Yaoshi, Ma Yu and the others stopped fighting immediately and leaped back. They saw that the person who risked her life to protect her master was Mei Chaofeng. Huang Yaoshi turned his head around and coldly laughed, "The Old Poison is really poisonous, you truly live up to your reputation!"

As his attack accidentally hit someone else, Ouyang Feng cried out in his heart, "What a pity!" He was aware that if Huang Yaoshi joined hands with the Quanzhen Seven Masters, his life would be difficult to protect. With a loud laugh he flew out the door and ran away.

Ma Yu stooped down to hold Tan Chuduan and he was shocked. Tan Chuduan's body was askew, his head was drooping to the side. It turned out this one strike of Ouyang Feng had broken the ribs on his back and his spine. Seeing his Shi Di's life was cut short Ma Yu's tears flowed down like rain.

Qiu Chuji pursued out with a sword in his hand, only to hear Ouyang Feng calling out from a far, "Old Heretic Huang, I helped you breaking the Wang Chongyang's formation, I also punished the Peach Blossom Island's renegade disciple on your behalf. You can take care of the remaining six mixed-up hairs by yourself. We'll see each other again later!"

"Humph!" Huang Yaoshi snorted; he knew Ouyang Feng was spreading his poison again, trying to incite tension between him and the Quanzhen Sect by placing the blame of the killing of Tan Chuduan on his shoulder, so that the Quanzhen Sect would seek their revenge on him. He

understood very well Ouyang Feng's ill intention, yet he was not willing to explain anything to the Quanzhen Seven Masters. Slowly he held Mei Chaofeng up; he saw the blood spurting out from her to the ground, he knew she would not live.

Qiu Chuji pursued for dozens of 'zhang's but he could not see which direction Ouyang Feng took. Ma Yu was afraid if he was chasing on his own he would also fall into Ouyang Feng's poisonous hand, so Ma Yu shouted, "Qiu Shi Di! Come Back!"

Qiu Chuji's eyes were on fire; he came back in big strides, pointed his finger to Huang Yaoshi and scolded him, "What enmity do you have with the Quanzhen Sect? You are a wicked ghost! First you killed our Zhou Shishu, now you harmed our Tan Shi Ge. Why did you come over here?"

Huang Yaoshi was startled. "Zhou Botong?" he asked, "I killed him?"

"You still don't want to admit it?" Qiu Chuji said.

Actually Huang Yaoshi was having a race with Zhou Botong and Ouyang Feng. They had run for several hundreds 'li's and were inseparable from each other; nobody was willing to give up. While they were running, Zhou Botong suddenly remembered he left Hong Qigong alone at the imperial palace. Hong Qigong had lost his martial art skill; if he was discovered by the palace guards, his life would be in danger. So he said, "The Old Urchin has a business to attend. I don't want to race anymore!" Once he said he did not want to race, he did not want to race. Huang Yaoshi and Ouyang Feng could not make him do otherwise and were forced to let him go. Huang Yaoshi had wanted to ask Zhou Botong for news about his beloved daughter but all along he did not have the opportunity to do so.

Tan Chuduan and the others were pursuing behind, but very soon they lost track of the three's shadows. However, Huang Yaoshi and the other two could see them clearly. So as the Old Urchin left to tend his business, the Eastern Heretic and the Western Poison two people decided to return to the Ox Village without expecting what was waiting for them over there.

By now Qiu Chuji was stomping his feet in fury, Sun Bu'er was crying while holding Tan Chuduan's body. Everybody wanted to stake it all to fight Huang Yaoshi. Huang Yaoshi knew there was a misunderstanding here, but being a man of his position he simply laughed coldly without saying anything.

Tan Chuduan opened his eyes slowly and in a low voice said, "I am leaving." Qiu Chuji and the others quickly gathered around him, sitting cross-legged on the ground. They heard Tan Chuduan softly recite, "Holding hands, the departed soul, like a string of pearls, forcing itself to leave. Hearts are open to the sound of nature, unlike the blowing flute." As he finished reciting, he closed his eyes and died.

The Quanzhen Six Masters lowered their heads to pray. Finished praying, Ma Yu held Tan Chuduan's lifeless body in his arms. Qiu Chuji, Yin Zhiping and the others followed behind without even looking back. At this moment Qiu Chuji, Sun Bu'er and the others realized that with the death of Tan Chuduan the Big Dipper Formation was broken. If they continued fighting Huang Yaoshi they would only deliver six more lives. Revenge had to wait some other day.

**End of Chapter 25.**

# Chapter 26 - New Allies, Old Arrangements

Translated by Owbjhx



*Huang Yaoshi noticed the sorrowful expression on his daughter's face; obviously her emotions were difficult to deny or to release. He knew her deep love toward Guo Jing was unchangeable and inseparable. He could not help but heave a long sigh. Huang Rong stood still, teardrops falling slowly.*

Huang Yaoshi reflected on how he'd incomprehensibly come into conflict with the Quanzhen Seven, and – even more incomprehensibly – established a deep grievance with them. There'd really been no reason for it at all. Seeing Mei Chaofeng wheezing ever fainter, he thought of the grudge he'd held for over a decade, and he felt a great, unbearable anguish within him. Tears began to fall.

A hint of a smile appeared on the corners of Mei Chaofeng's lips. "Teacher," she said, "please...treat me like that way you used to – the kind way you treated me before. I've wronged you: wronged you too much, too far! Let me be by your side forever...forever to serve you. I'm dying fast. Time's almost up!" An imploring look covered her face.

Huang Yaoshi's eyes were brimming with tears. "Very well, very well! I'll treat you just like I did back when you were little," he said. "So from today, Ruohua better be a good girl, and pay attention to what teacher says."

Mei Chaofeng's betrayal of school and teacher was the greatest regret of her life. But now, facing death, she had somehow gained forgiveness from her teacher, who was once again calling her by her childhood name of former days. Beside herself with joy, she clasped Huang Yaoshi's right hand, gently trembling, in both of hers.

"Ruohua will pay attention forever," she said. "Teacher, I want to learn how to be 12-year-old Ruohua again. Teacher, tell me how, tell me how..." She rose up with all her

strength, determined to perform the rite of acknowledgement. After her third kowtow, she stiffened, never to move again.

From the other room, Huang Rong had witnessed these heart-moving, soul-stirring events unfold in succession, but hoped only that her father would stay a bit longer so she could come out and meet him the moment Guo Jing was respiring smoothly. She watched as Huang Yaoshi stooped, about to gather Mei Chaofeng's body in his arms.

Suddenly, there was the sound of a horse neighing outside – the sound, in fact, of Guo Jing's Little Red. Then Sha Gu's voice could be heard: "Well, this is Ox Village. How am I supposed to know if there's someone here called 'Guo'? Are you called 'Guo'?" Someone else, in a hugely impatient tone, answered: "With such few households in the village, how come you don't know everybody around here?" At this, the door burst in, and several people entered.

Behind the open door, the look on Huang Yaoshi's face suddenly changed: those entering were exactly who he'd been hunting as fruitlessly as if he'd been treading in broken iron shoes – the Six Freaks of Jiangnan. As it happened, they'd gone to Peach Blossom Island for the appointment; but whether they turned east or west, they ended up in circles, and found no way into Huang Yaoshi's residence. Later, they chanced upon one of the island's mute servants, and realised there that he'd already left. When the Freaks saw the Little Red dashing around in the forest, Han Baoju brought it under control, and the six then came to Ox Village looking for Guo Jing.

The Freaks had just stepped through the doorway when 'The Soaring Bat' Ke Zhen'e, whose hearing was acute, suddenly sensed the sound of breathing coming from behind the door. "Someone's here!" he shouted. The six

turned around instantly, and got a big shock: Huang Yaoshi, carrying the dead body of Mei Chaofeng across his arms, stood blocking the doorway, as if to stop them from escaping.

Zhu Cong gave a deep bow. "Master Huang," he said, his hands folded respectfully, "my best wishes to your good health! The six of us observed the summons to visit Peach Blossom Island and pay our respects, but it so happened that the Master was engaged with other business. How fortunate it is that today our paths should cross here!"

Huang Yaoshi had just intended to strike immediately and kill the Six Freaks, but with a glance at the pale face of Mei Chaofeng, he reconsidered: "The Freaks were her mortal enemies. Today, she might have died the sooner, but I'll enable her to kill off the Six with her own hands still. Should she learn of it in the netherworld, she'll definitely be pleased." His right hand holding the corpse and his left hand raising her wrist, in a sudden flash he was bearing down on Han Baoju, aiming Mei Chaofeng's palm at his right arm. In a panic, Han Baoju tried to dodge, but it was already too late: there was a loud crack as his arm took the hit. As if using Mei Chaofeng's palm as a weapon, Huang Yaoshi channelled his martial arts through the dead hand, transmitting a massive force of astonishing power. Although it didn't snap Han Baoju's arm, it left half his body tingling in paralysis.

For the Freaks, nothing could be more horrifying: Huang Yaoshi, without a single word, had immediately advanced and issued a vicious strike - and using the corpse of Mei Chaofeng as a weapon, too. There was a chorus of shouts as each drew their armaments, but Huang Yaoshi couldn't care less; raising high the body of Mei Chaofeng, he shot straight over, and Han Xiaoying was in the firing line. She saw the eyes of Mei Chaofeng, still round and staring after

death – the long hair draping the shoulders, the mouth edged with brimming blood twisted in a terrifying grimace – and the right hand held high, then violently pounding down towards the top of her own head. Scared, her hands and feet went numb, dodging and blocking forgotten.

With the wave of a shoulderpole and the flick of a counterpoise, Nan Xiren and Quan Jinfa launched simultaneous attacks at Mei Chaofeng's arm. Huang Yaoshi pulled back the right arm of the corpse and swung out with the left arm, hitting Han Xiaoying right in the waist. In pain, she squatted straight down. Han Baoju, tilting as he stepped up diagonally, unfurled his Golden Dragon Whip; but Huang Yaoshi strode forward with his left foot and stamped firmly on the whip's point. Han Baoju tried to free it with a mighty pull, but how could he move it one iota? In the space of a blink, Mei Chaofeng's claw was slashing at his face. Stunned, Han Baoju ditched the whip and recoiled, rolling away immediately. Feeling his face searing with agony, he touched it with his palm and saw it come away covered in fresh blood – five nail scars had already been gouged in him. It was fortunate that Mei Chaofeng was dead and therefore unable to unleash the 9 Yin White Bone Claw form, and that the fierce poison on her nails had dissipated with the exhaustion of her qi. Otherwise, this one claw would have been instantly fatal.

After just a few exchanges, it was as if the Freaks were fighting for their lives on every side. If it hadn't been for Huang Yaoshi intending Mei Chaofeng to kill with her own hands in posthumous vengeance, and deciding to use her limbs to destroy the enemy, the Six would have died long ago or been taken to the edge of death by injury. And even so, the Six were still living breath-by-breath against the Master of Peach Blossom Island, whose moves would come and go like a phantom's.



In the other room, Guo Jing had been overjoyed when he heard Zhu Cong hailing Huang Yaoshi. But then, he'd listened as the seven fought, his six beneficent teachers panting for breath and crying out as they held on with all their strength. The situation was desperately critical. The qi in his dantian had yet to stabilise; but with the gratitude he owed to his teachers for raising him being no different to that he owed his parents, how could he just keep his hands in his sleeves? Immediately restricting his qi and concentrating his breath, he launched out a palm. There was a loud bang as his strike shattered the secret door.

Huang Rong was shocked. She'd seen that he hadn't fully completed his progress - there was still a bit more effort left - and yet, at this point, he was using his strength to unleash a palm. Fearing he was endangering his life, she cried urgently: "Jing gege, don't do it!"

As soon as Guo Jing had sent out the palm, he felt the qi in his dantian surge upwards, a heat firing his insides. He hurried to restrain and close in the qi, forcing his inner breath hard back into his dantian.

Seeing the cupboard door suddenly shatter and reveal Guo Jing and Huang Rong, Huang Yaoshi and the Six Freaks leapt back from each other, startled and delighted at the same time.

Suddenly seeing his beloved daughter, Huang Yaoshi was unsure if he was dreaming. He rubbed his eyes. "Rong'er, Rong'er," he called out, "is it really you?"

Huang Rong, still holding one palm enjoined with Guo Jing's left, gave a slight smile and nodded her head, but said nothing. At this, Huang Yaoshi's joy exceeded all expectation; putting other thoughts behind him, he laid Mei Chaofeng's body down on a bench, went over to the

cupboard, and sat down cross-legged. One touch of his daughter's wrist, and he felt her pulse and breathing firm and steady. Then, reaching through the cupboard doorway, he pressed his left palm against Guo Jing's right.

The many currents of sizzling qi boiling and bubbling inside Guo Jing's body were already unbearable in the extreme; by this point, there'd been several times when he'd wanted to leap up screaming and shouting to relieve the pressure. When Huang Yaoshi's palm came to enjoin with his, a stream of inner power flowed through with tremendous force, and instantly he felt a gradual settlement. Using his right hand, Huang Yaoshi set about kneading and massaging all the critical acupoints on Guo Jing; so profound was his neigong that, in just the time it took to make a bowl of rice, he had saved Guo Jing's life.

Guo Jing, now regulating his qi with miraculous ease and circulating his inner breath freely, leapt through the cupboard doorway, bowed towards Huang Yaoshi, and immediately went to kowtow to his six teachers.

On the one side, Guo Jing was telling his teachers about the ins and outs of the situation; on the other side, Huang Yaoshi was leading his daughter by the hand and listening to her giggly chatter, her narrative punctuated with laughter. At first, the Freaks followed what Guo Jing was saying. But he was a dull talker, struggling to convey what he meant in words. Huang Rong, however, not only had a clear, crisp voice, but also a splendid turn of phrase; and when she got to the thrilling bits, her depictions scintillated with a hundred extra tones and colours. One by one, the Six involuntarily went over to listen; Guo Jing, too, finally shut up, turning from a speaker to a listener. Huang Rong did almost an hour's worth of talking. With her expressions taking full flight – now grave, now comic – everybody

listened enraptured to her pearls of wit, as if savouring a charming vintage wine.

Huang Yaoshi, upon hearing his beloved daughter had somehow become the Chief of the Beggar Gang, was utterly bewildered. "What a bizarre move from Brother Qi!" he remarked. "And how heretical of him! Perhaps he's thinking of stealing my nickname - no longer being the 'Northern Beggar', and instead being the 'Northern Heretic'? The 'Five Greats' would then be the 'Eastern Beggar', 'Western Venom', 'Southern Emperor', 'Northern Heretic', and 'Central Who-Knows-What?'"

Her tale having reached the fight between Huang Yaoshi and the Freaks, Huang Rong gave a laugh. "That's all," she said. "There's no use me saying what happened next!"

Huang Yaoshi announced: "I'm going to go and kill those four bastards Ouyang Feng, Lingzhi, Qiu Qianren and Yang Kang. Come with me and watch the fun, kid." He was talking about killing people, but because he was looking fondly upon his beloved daughter, his face was all smiles.

Taking a glance at the Freaks, he felt rather contrite. Yet although he knew himself to be clearly in the wrong, he was still unwilling to hang his head and admit a fault to anyone, only offering: "The movement of qi hasn't turned out too badly. It didn't make me harm someone good by accident."

As for Huang Rong, she'd originally resented the Freaks for prohibiting Guo Jing from getting married with her. But now that Mu Nianci and Yang Kang had gotten engaged, this issue had already been resolved. "Daddy," she giggled, "how about admitting to the teachers that you made a mistake?"

Huang Yaoshi gave a snort. "I'm going to go and find Western Venom," he said, changing the subject. He added:

“Jing’er, you come too.”

Fundamentally, he felt deeply displeased at this crude, block-headed Guo Jing. “I, Huang Yaoshi, am absolutely brilliant,” he had mused. “But with such a dumbass as a son-in-law, wouldn’t that make those in wulin laugh their lips off?” He had consented to the engagement with great difficulty. It then so happened that Zhou Botong, not telling apart the silly and the serious, had cracked a reckless joke claiming Guo Jing had borrowed Mei Chaofeng’s 9 Yin Scripture and made a copy. In the midst of his rage, he had believed this to be true, and was furious at Guo Jing’s dirty underhandedness. But after having sent off Hong Qigong, Ouyang Feng, Zhou Botong and the others, he’d immediately realised that the text of the second-volume scripture that Guo Jing had learnt was far clearer than that in the second volume held by Mei Chaofeng. Moreover, this was without considering ‘let alone nowadays’, and so on. Guo Jing just couldn’t have copied from Mei Chaofeng’s handwritten text, and anyway, Huang Yaoshi had known long ago that Zhou Botong was telling lies. Later, he’d mistakenly believed Lingzhi’s made-up news of Huang Rong’s death.

Now, wild with joy at finally seeing his beloved daughter again, the grievance he held against the Freaks had momentarily vanished. It was just that he was unwilling to admit a fault or to make an apology; but he hoped in future to be able to help them with some serious matter, as a way of making amends.

Looking back on Mei Chaofeng who, in sacrificing herself to save him from great ruin, had not forgotten her gratitude to her teacher – not unto death – he pondered: “Ruohua and her martial brother Xuanfeng were in love. If they’d come and informed me about it, and petitioned to marry, I wouldn’t necessarily have forbidden them. There was no

need to be rash and take the big risk of running away from Peach Blossom Island. But I've been moody throughout my life, never settling on joy or rage. The two of them must have considered it from every angle, and – in the end – didn't dare to open their mouths. Now suppose Rong'er, because of this eccentric temper of mine, were to end up just like Ruohua..." The thought made him shudder. By calling out this word "Jing'er", he was actually acknowledging Guo Jing as son-in-law.

Huang Rong was delighted. From the corner of her eye, she glanced at Guo Jing, who looked totally unaware of the implications held by this one-word title of "Jing'er". "Dad," she said, "let's go to the palace first and bring teacher out."

At this point, Guo Jing confessed to his teachers about Huang Yaoshi assenting to the marriage on Peach Blossom Island, as well as the situation with Hong Qigong accepting him as a disciple. A pleased Ke Zhen'e said: "You've somehow set things up so that you can call The Divine Nine-Fingered Beggar your teacher, and you've duped the Master of Peach Blossom Island into letting you marry his beloved daughter. We're more than happy with it; where's the sense in refusing? It's just that the Mongolian Khan..." Recalling that Genghis Khan had granted Guo Jing the title 'Prince Consort of the Golden Blade', this was now something of an awkward matter which, if brought up, would surely provoke Huang Yaoshi into fury. For a moment, he wondered how he could mention it.

Suddenly, there was a creak as the main door was pushed open; in came Sha Gu laughing, holding a piece of yellow vellum twisted into the shape of a monkey.

"Sister," she said to Huang Rong, "are you done eating watermelons? Oldie asked me to give you this monkey to play with."

Huang Rong, assuming Sha Gu was just being silly and thinking nothing of it, reached out and took the paper monkey. Sha Gu added: "Hairy oldie says don't get angry; he'll definitely find teacher for you." When Huang Rong heard that she was obviously talking about Zhou Botong, she looked at the monkey and saw that there were words written on the paper. Hurrying to unravel it, the following was revealed in a crooked scrawl over the surface:

*Old Beggar was nowhere I looked,  
Old Urchin was ever so good.*

Huang Rong gave a worried gasp. "How come he didn't see teacher?" she said.

Huang Yaoshi muttered to himself for a while. "Old Urchin might be deranged," he said, finally, "but his martial arts are terrific. As long as Qigong's still alive, he can surely rescue him. More immediately, the Beggar Gang are facing a big problem."

"What problem?" asked Huang Rong.

Huang Yaoshi replied: "The bamboo stick the old beggar gave you was taken away by Yang Kang. Although that brat's martial arts aren't great, he's still a nasty scoundrel; even such a person as Ouyang Ke died by his hand. Now he's got hold of the bamboo stick, he'll definitely go stirring up a storm, to make trouble for the Beggar Gang. We ought to catch up with him and retrieve it, or else the old beggar's brethren are going to suffer generations of serious hardship – and you, as chief, won't be reflected in glory."

Normally, the Beggar Gang being in trouble wouldn't prey on Huang Yaoshi's mind in the slightest; on the contrary, he'd rejoice in their disaster and take pleasure in their ruin, seeing it as a great spectacle of fun. But now that his

beloved daughter had become the Chief of the Beggar Gang, how could he still keep his hands in his sleeves?

One after the other, the Six Freaks nodded their heads. "But he's already been gone for days," said Guo Jing. "I'm worried catching up will be hard."

Han Baoju pointed out: "Your Little Red horse is here – just when you could use it!"

Delighted, Guo Jing rushed out the door and made a whistle to summon it. Seeing its owner, the red horse bounded and galloped over, brushing up close against him and neighing incessantly with excitement.

"Rong'er," said Huang Yaoshi, "you and Jing'er hurry and grab that bamboo stick. This red horse goes at a speedy pace; I expect you'll soon catch up."

Having said this, he noticed a smiling Sha Gu standing by the side, with an expression exactly like that of Qu Lingfeng, his own disciple. A thought occurred to him. "Are you called 'Qu'?" he asked her.

Sha Gu laughed and shook her head. "Don't know," she said. Huang Yaoshi had long been aware that his disciple Qu Lingfeng had a daughter, and calculated that her age also appeared to fit.

"Dad," said Huang Rong, "come and look!" Leading him by the hand, she went into the secret room.

Huang Yaoshi, seeing that the separated arrangement of the secret room was completely in a pattern he himself had originated, felt that it was surely the work of Qu Lingfeng.

"Dad," said Huang Rong, "take a look at the things in that iron chest. If you can figure out what they are, I guess that makes you an expert!"

But Huang Yaoshi ignored the iron chest. Going over to the southwest corner and lifting up the sideboard at the foot of the wall, he revealed a cavity. Reaching inside, he pinched out a scroll of paper and right away leaped out of the secret room. Huang Rong hastily followed him out. Coming up behind her father, she saw the scroll unfolded in his hands, the paper's surface covered in dust and its edges browned and broken. Written on it, in crooked handwriting, were a few rows of words:

*Addressed most respectfully to venerable senior Master Huang of Peach Blossom Island:*

*Disciple has acquired, from within the palace, assorted calligraphy, paintings, and other artefacts, which he wishes to present for Master's appreciation.*

*Disciple respectfully refers to 'Master', not daring the presumption to utter 'beneficent teacher' – even if, in disciple's dreams, he still utters 'beneficent teacher' yet.*

*Misfortune has had it that disciple was encircled by palace guards, and is survived by a daughter...*

The writing having reached the word “daughter”, there was nothing further – except for a few splattered marks which could faintly be discerned as bloodstains.

At the time of Huang Rong's birth, all the disciples had already suffered expulsion from Peach Blossom Island, and Qu Lingfeng had suffered it the earliest. Huang Rong, knowing that each person under the tutelage of her father had been a terrific individual, couldn't help feeling alarmed at seeing today this report left behind by Qu Lingfeng.

By now, Huang Yaoshi had already understood the heart of it. He knew that, after Qu Lingfeng had been expelled from his teaching, he had agonised hard over gaining readmittance to the school of Peach Blossom Island. Recalling that Huang Yaoshi was fond of treasures,



antiques, and samples from the work of famous painters, he had taken the risk of going to the imperial palace and committing robbery. This had gone favourably for a few times, but in the end, he had been discovered by the imperial guards. After a fierce fight, he had sustained a serious wound; returning home to write his final will, he must have struggled to finish it because of the seriousness of his injury. When, not long after, the master guardsman came in in pursuit, both sides ended up dying right here.

Huang Yaoshi was already remorseful after having seen Lu Chengfeng that last time. Now, with the recent death of Mei Chaofeng and the sight of such dedication from Qu Lingfeng, he felt even more guilt. Turning his head and spotting the grinning Sha Gu standing behind him, he had a thought. "Did your father teach you how to fight?" he asked, in a stern voice.

Sha Gu shook her head; running over to the door, she closed it and then furtively took peep after peep through the crack in the doorway, throwing a few punching moves. But as the punches came and went, they were all of the same six or seven unpolished moves from the 'Blue Wave Palm' form, and nothing else.

"Dad," Huang Rong commented, "she taught herself by spying when Martial Brother Qu was practicing martial arts."

Huang Yaoshi nodded his head, murmuring: "I expected Lingfeng wouldn't have such a nerve as to dare pass one's martial arts to others after having left my tutelage." He added: "Rong'er, try attacking her footwork. Trip her up."

Huang Rong stepped up, giggling. "Sha Gu," she said, "let's practice some martial arts. Look out!"

Throwing a feint with her left palm, she immediately followed with a 'Matching Ducks Joined by a Ring', launching two kicks with unrivalled speed. Sha Gu, dumbstruck, had already taken Huang Rong's left kick on her right hip before she hurriedly stepped back. But she didn't know that Huang Rong's right leg, placed in advance, was waiting behind her; she was still unsteady from her step back when her momentum made her trip and she toppled face-up.

Leaping up immediately, she shouted: "You cheated! Little sister, let's go again."

Huang Yaoshi's face darkened. "Who's the 'little sister'?" he said. "It's 'auntie'!"

Sha Gu, who didn't know the difference between "sister" and "auntie" anyway, laughed. "Auntie! Auntie!" she said, obediently.

Huang Rong had already understood. She thought: "Daddy basically wanted me to test her footwork. Both of Martial Brother Qu's legs were broken, so when he was practicing martial arts by himself, he obviously didn't practice using his legs and feet; therefore, Sha Gu wouldn't have been able to spy on any footwork. If he had trained her personally, then he'd have taught her skills for all areas: upper-body, mid-section, and footwork."

By calling out the word "auntie", Huang Yaoshi was finally accepting Sha Gu back under his tutelage. "Why the heck are you so silly?" he asked her.

She laughed: "I'm Sha Gu!"

Huang Yaoshi scowled. "Where's your mum?"

Sha Gu put on a crying face, answering: "Gone to granny's place."

Huang Yaoshi then asked seven or eight questions in a row, but he didn't get anything that mattered. He could only give a sigh and leave it at that. When Qu Lingfeng was still in his tutelage, he was aware that he had a silly daughter who wasn't very bright. That, for sure, was Sha Gu.

There and then, they buried Mei Chaofeng in the back garden. Guo Jing and Huang Rong carried out the skeleton of Qu Lingfeng and buried it next to Mei Chaofeng. Although the Six Freaks were mortal enemies with the 'Twin Spectres of the Black Winds', the death of a person was what was important; they too all kowtowed before the grave, offering wishes and dismissing their prior grievance.

Huang Yaoshi, gazing at the two new graves for a long while, felt a hundred feelings mixed together. "Rong'er," he said, sadly, "let's go and look at your Martial Brother Qu's treasures." At that, father and daughter walked back into the secret room.

Looking at the things Qu Lingfeng had left behind, Huang Yaoshi was silent for a long time. Shedding tears, he said: "Among the disciples under my tutelage, Lingfeng had the strongest martial arts and the brightest mind. If his legs hadn't been broken, even one hundred palace guards wouldn't have been able to hurt him."

"That's a matter of course," said Huang Rong. "Dad, are you going to teach Sha Gu martial arts personally?"

"I'll teach her martial arts," he murmured. "And I'll teach her verse-writing, qin-playing, the mysteries of the five elements...All the skills that back then your Martial Brother Qu wanted to learn but didn't learn - I'll teach her, comprehensively."

Huang Rong stuck out her tongue, and thought: “Heretical thoughts from a heretical man! Daddy’s letting himself in for a lot of stress.”

Huang Yaoshi opened the iron chest, looking through it layer by layer. The more valuable the treasures, the more sorrow he felt. Seeing rolled-up paintings and calligraphy, he sighed, remarking: “No doubt it’s great to use this stuff as a pleasing diversion from frustration, but as for expending one’s will over playthings – that must never happen. How fine were the pictures of flowers, birds and figures painted by the Taoist ruler, Emperor Huizong! Yet having depicted the rivers and mountains in all their splendour, he rolled them up and gifted them to the Jins.” As he spoke, he furled and unfurled the scrolls. “Eh?” he said, suddenly.

Huang Rong asked: “Dad, what is it?”

Huang Yaoshi pointed out a landscape in splash-ink, saying: “Look here!”

In the painting was a towering mountain, with a total of five steep peaks. Among them, one peak was outstandingly tall – bolt upright and pointing to the heavens, it pierced the clouds with its colossal height and overlooked a deep chasm below. A row of pine trees grew by the mountainside. Twigs tipped with snow, each winding trunk curved to the south, suggesting the utter ferocity of the north wind. To the west of the summit was a lone pine: old, but stiff and upstanding, and rising with an elegant majesty. Beneath this pine, vermilion brushstrokes profiled a general, twirling his sword in the face of the wind. The figure’s features were hard to discern, but the sleeves of his clothes rose in a flutter, and his bearing escaped the ordinary. The entire picture was a monochromatic landscape, but this man alone

was a firey, blackish red – making him seem all the more outstanding and exceptional.

The painting was without a signature. It was annotated only with the following poem:

*My clothing covered with the marks of many years,  
In special search of em'rald haven's fragrant heights,  
I've never seen enough of hills and rivers fine,  
As cavalry by moonlight hurries to retreat.*

A few days ago, Huang Rong had seen this poem as written down by Han Shizhong on the Emerald Haven Pavilion in Lin'an, and recognized the handwriting. "Dad," she said, "this was written by Han Shizhong. The verses are of the late, mighty Yue."

Huang Yaoshi nodded. "That's right, my clever Rong'er!" he said. "But this poem of the late Yue was actually describing the 'emerald haven' of the mountains in Chizhou. The mountains in the painting make a treacherous scene; they're no 'emerald haven' at all. Although this painting's style has a fine firmness, it's short on implication and tasteful accent; it's not by the hand of a master."

That day at the Emerald Haven Pavilion, Huang Rong had seen Guo Jing – reluctant to leave – tracing his fingers along the stone inscription and brushing over the remains of Han Shizhong's handwriting. Knowing that he'd be fond of it, she said: "Dad, let Guo Jing have this painting."

Huang Yaoshi laughed. "Girls, by birth, are extroverts," he said. "What else is there to say?"

Handing it over to her freely, he reached into the iron chest again and picked up a necklace, remarking: "This string of pearls is each and every one of the same size; that's truly hard to come by." After he gave it to Huang Rong to wear

around her neck, she threw herself into his arms, and he reached out and held her in a hug. Father and daughter smiled at each other, nestling cheek against cheek, both feeling a never-ending warmth.

Huang Rong had just rolled up the painting when suddenly, she heard several harsh, urgent cries of eagles overhead. Huang Rong, who was highly fond of that pair of white eagles, remembered that they'd already been taken back by Huazheng, and felt very unhappy. Wanting to play with them again for a bit, she emerged from the secret room in a hurry.

Outside the doorway, she saw Guo Jing standing under the big willow tree, one eagle pulling the shoulder of his clothes with its beak and leading him somewhere, the other eagle circling him and crying repeatedly. Sha Gu, watching in amusement, was wheeling round and round Guo Jing, clapping and giggling.

Guo Jing had an agitated look. "Rong'er," he said, "they're in trouble! Let's hurry and go save them!"

"Who?" asked Huang Rong.

Guo Jing replied: "My sworn brother and sister!"

Huang Rong threw a pout with her little lips. "Well, I'm not going!" she said.

Guo Jing, unaware of her feelings, was baffled. "Rong'er, don't be so childish!" he said, urgently. "Come on!" Harnessing the red horse, he slung himself into the saddle.

"Then...do you still want me or not?" said Huang Rong.

Guo Jing scratched his head in further bafflement. "How could I not want you?" he said. "I can go without my own

life, but I can't go without you." Holding the reins with his left, he stretched out his right hand to receive her.

Huang Rong gave a beautiful smile and called out: "Dad, we're going to the rescue. You and the six teachers come too." She leaped over, latched onto Guo Jing's right hand with her left, and pulled herself up to sit behind him on the horse's back. Guo Jing, on horseback, bowed ceremoniously to Huang Yaoshi and his six teachers, and prompted the horse forward; ahead, the pair of eagles led the way, giving a long cry in unison.

The Little Red horse had been separated from its master for very long; now that it was carrying him once again, it felt an inexpressible happiness. Invigorated in spirit, it galloped onwards as if hauled by lightning and sped by the wind; although the two white eagles were fast flyers, the Little Red somehow kept up with them.

Not long after, the eagles dived down into a dark, dense forest ahead. The Little Red, not waiting for its master's guidance, also raced straight towards the forest.

Arriving just outside the forest, they suddenly heard a voice like a cracked cymbal emanating from within the trees: "Brother Qianren, long have I known your mighty reputation as the venerable hero of Iron Palm! Younger brother has a great desire to admire, and marvel at, the virtuosity of your divine arts; it's a pity that senior brother couldn't participate at the Mount Hua Duels back then. Right now, let's 'throw brick to lure jade'. Firstly, younger brother will use his trivial skills to finish off one of these; then, how about senior brother letting loose in the awesome spirit of Iron Palm?" Following this, someone gave a loud cry of misery, the treetops swayed in the forest canopy, and a big tree came crashing down. Shocked, Guo Jing dismounted and rushed into the forest.

Huang Rong dismounted too. Patting the Little Red's head, she pointed back at the direction they'd come from, and said: "Quick, go bring my daddy here!" The Little Red turned around and zoomed off.

"I just hope daddy comes quick," thought Huang Rong, "or else, we're going to get it from Old Venom again."

Hiding herself behind the trees, she crept quietly into the forest. One glance later, she couldn't help feeling astounded: Tuolei, Huazheng, Zhebie and Bo'erhu had all been tied up separate from each other against four big trees, and in front of them stood Ouyang Feng and Qiu Qianren. Against another tree - which had collapsed - there was also someone tied; covered in brightly-coloured clothes and armour, this was actually the Song commander who'd been escorting Tuolei back north. He'd been given a push from the stone-splitting, tree-snapping force that was Ouyang Feng's palm. The front of his body was totally coated in blood, and the eyes in his drooping head were shut; he'd already been killed. The many soldiers had, to a man, disappeared without a trace; they'd presumably been routed by the two.

Qiu Qianren, who dared not compare palm power with Ouyang Feng, was just about to say a few things to bluff his way through when he heard the sound of footsteps behind him. Turning around to see Guo Jing, he felt both alarm and glee - just in time to make use of Western Venom to eliminate him! All he had to do was induce the two of them to get fighting, and then there'd be no need to take action himself.

Ouyang Feng saw that Guo Jing had borne the powerful force of his own Toad Art, and yet hadn't died; this was highly unexpected.



“Guo Jing gege,” cried out Huazheng in delight, “you’re still alive! Super, super!”

Seeing the situation before her, Huang Rong had already concluded her calculations. “While waiting for daddy to come,” she planned, “I ought to delay things for a bit.”

“Bastards!” shouted Guo Jing. “What are you two oldies doing here? Planning murder again?”

Ouyang Feng, intending to get a clear look at Qiu Qianren’s martial arts, gave a slight smile and didn’t respond.

“Why aren’t you bowing down before Master Ouyang, boy?” shouted Qiu Qianren. “Bored being alive, are you?”

From within the secret room, Guo Jing had listened to Qiu Qianren saying all sorts of outrageous things to stir up controversy, and now he was trying to murder people. Hating him to the core, he strode forward two paces and let out a shout, throwing a ‘Repentance of the Haughty Dragon’ at Qiu Qianren’s chest. By now, his ability with the 18 Dragon-Subduing Palms was no small matter; this particular palm was four parts release and six parts restraint, its power unleashed and instantly withdrawn. Qiu Qianren tried to dodge the oncoming force by hurriedly tilting his body but still had to deal with the arriving palm wind, and helplessly, he dropped forward instead of moving backwards.

Guo Jing gave a yell and threw a left-handed reverse palm, aiming for a tongue-splitting, tooth-dropping hit, after which Qiu Qianren would never again profit from wagging his tongue and provoking a storm.

Although this palm was strong in force, it was thrown quite slowly, but in placement it was just right – making it impossible for Qiu Qianren to dodge. It looked like it was

about to hit him in the cheek when suddenly, Huang Rong called out: "Hold it!"

Guo Jing instantly converted his left hand into a grappling palm. Seizing Qiu Qianren by the back of the neck, Guo Jing lifted him up, then turned his head and asked: "What?"

Huang Rong was worried that, if Guo Jing wounded this oldie, Ouyang Feng would immediately go on the attack. "Quick, let go!" she said. "The 'facial martial arts' of this senior master are phenomenal. Once your palm hits his face, its force will be fired back at you; you won't avoid internal injury!"

Guo Jing, not knowing she was speaking in ridicule, was incredulous. "There's no such thing!" he protested.

Huang Rong added: "Senior master Qiu can strip the hide off an ox with just a gust of his breath! Why aren't you getting out of the way?"

Guo Jing was even more incredulous. But realizing that she surely had some intention, he duly put Qiu Qianren down and let go of his neck.

Qiu Qianren cackled loud with laughter. "Young miss sees the danger yet!" he said. "With you little kiddies, I've no grievance, no enmity. By the abundant goodness of heaven above, how could I - being the senior - do as the big bully the small, and injure you as I please?"

Huang Rong smiled. "That's well said," she replied. "I'm a great admirer of senior master's skill; today, I'd like to seek advice on expert moves. But don't you injure me!" At that, she put her guard up; her left hand raised, she rolled her right into a hollow fist, brought it to her mouth, and blew a few times.

"Here's a move called 'Tooting One's Own Conch'," she laughed. "En garde!"

"Young miss has some gall!" said Qiu Qianren. "The name of Master Ouyang is pervasive under heaven – your ridicule is unacceptable!"

There was a smack as Huang Rong threw a surprise right-handed slap, landing a crisp, clean hit on his face. Giggling, she said: "This move's called 'The Backlash of the Facetious Cheek'!"

Suddenly, from outside the woods came the sound of laughter, and someone said: "Excellent! And the same once again!"

Hearing the voice, Huang Rong realised that her father had now arrived. Immediately growing more daring, she gave a call of agreement and duly motioned to throw a right-hand slap. Qiu Qianren hastily ducked in avoidance, but didn't know that her move was actually a feint – the slap was instantly pulled and followed up with a left palm. Using the through-arm style of Six-Harmony Fist, he tried to swing out a block, but hadn't figured that his opponent's attack was still a feint; seeing her two tiny little palms fluttering up and down before his eyes like a couple of jade butterflies, his concentration slipped, and his right cheek took a slap yet again.

Qiu Qianren knew that, if the fight carried on, things could get positively out of hand. Shouting, he threw out two punches which forced Huang Rong to retreat a couple of steps, then straight away leapt aside with a cry of "Hold it!"

"What?" said Huang Rong, laughing. "Had enough?"

Qiu Qianren gave her a stern look. "Miss," he said, "you've already sustained an internal injury. Hurry off to a tranquil

room to convalesce for seven times seven days. And don't so much as peep outside, or else there's no guaranteeing your little life!"

Seeing him speak so seriously, Huang Rong couldn't help being startled for a moment – before bursting into giggles of uncontrollable laughter, her body trembling like the stem of a flower.

By now, Huang Yaoshi and the Six Freaks of Jiangnan had already caught up, and were puzzled at the sight of Tuolei and the others tied against trees.

Ouyang Feng had naturally heard that the martial arts of Qiu Qianren were astonishing. In one former year, he'd beaten the master warriors of the Hengshan School – which had rocked the southern realms with its might – until they lay dead or dying, using only his pair of iron palms. There and then, Hengshan suffered irrecoverable collapse, never again able to hold its position in wulin. But today, how come he couldn't even beat a little girl like Huang Rong? And could it be true that he had facial neigong, able to injure opponents by firing their force back at them? Not only was this unheard of, it didn't look like it, given his situation.

Just as Ouyang Feng was hesitating, he raised his head and suddenly spotted a document pouch of Sichuan brocade hanging aslant from Huang Yaoshi's shoulder, with a camel embroidered in white silk on its surface – the property, as it happened, of his own nephew. Deep down, he couldn't help feeling dread. Having left after killing Tan Chuduan and Mei Chaofeng, he had come back again just to collect his nephew. "Could it be that Huang Yaoshi has actually killed the lad in vengeance for his disciple?" he thought.

In a trembling voice, he asked: "What's happened to my nephew?"

“What’s happened to my disciple Mei Chaofeng is also what’s happened to your nephew,” replied Huang Yaoshi icily.

Ouyang Feng felt half his body go cold. Ouyang Ke had been born because of an illicit liaison between him and his sister-in-law; nephew by name, he was actually his dear son, and he loved this illegitimate son like life itself. He had felt that, although Huang Yaoshi and the Quanzhen Taoists had established deep grievances with him, all of these people were renowned champions in jianghu; with Ouyang Ke unable to move either of his legs an inch, there was no way they’d cause him trouble. He just had to wait for them to disperse, before taking his son to a quiet place where he’d recuperate from his injuries. Little did he know that Ouyang Ke had already met with brutality.

Huang Yaoshi watched him standing there, eyes staring straight ahead, about to launch a sudden attack any moment now. He knew that this would be unleashed with a mountain-moving, ocean-churning violence, an unstoppable force; inwardly, he readied himself.

“Who’s the killer?” growled Ouyang Feng. “One of yours, or one of Quanzhen’s?” He knew that, with Huang Yaoshi’s exalted status, he’d never kill with his own hands someone who had two broken legs. He must have got somebody else to do it. By now, Ouyang Feng’s naturally harsh voice had become even more ear-piercingly jarring.

Huang Yaoshi answered coldly: “A brat who’s studied Quanzhen martial arts plus some skills from Peach Blossom Island, and who’s well acquainted with you. You go and look for him.”

Huang Yaoshi was actually talking of Yang Kang, but when Ouyang Feng thought about it, Guo Jing instantly came to

mind. Bursting with rage and anguish, for a moment he aimed a ferocious glare at Guo Jing, and then turned his head to Huang Yaoshi. "What the heck are you doing taking my nephew's document pouch?" he asked.

"If the master map of Peach Blossom Island was with him, I had to take it back," said Huang Yaoshi. "In digging down to search for the map, it was necessary for me to trouble your excellent nephew - after his burial - with the sight of daylight once again. Of that, I feel rather regretful. It's a shame that although he had the document pouch on him, within the pouch, that master map was nowhere to be seen; the search ended up being a waste of Heretic Huang's efforts. Still, we definitely gave the remains of your nephew a proper resting-place; we dared not have it the least bit deficient."

"Well said, well said," remarked Ouyang Feng.

He was aware that victory and defeat against Huang Yaoshi would be hard to tell apart until after one or two thousand moves had been exchanged, and that he'd not necessarily be the one standing in the ascendancy. Fortunately, he'd already gotten his hands on the 9 Yin Scripture, and anyway, there was no impatience for the day of revenge. But if Qiu Qianren could beat up the Jiangnan Six, Guo Jing and Huang Rong - and afterwards, come to his assistance - the two of them joining forces might take the life of Huang Yaoshi there and then. At this time of bereavement, from the sudden news that his dear son had been killed, he was still capable of coolly appraising the situation between himself and the enemy; and having calculated the chances of winning were higher, he wasn't willing to let the opportunity go. He turned his head to Qiu Qianren.

"Brother Qianren," he said, "you massacre these eight, while I deal with Heretic Huang."

Qiu Qianren laughed and gave a few gentle waves of his big cattail-leaf fan. "That's fine," he said. "I'll come and help you after I've massacred these eight."

"Precisely," said Ouyang Feng.

And with that one word, he fixed his glaring eyes on Huang Yaoshi, and slowly began crouching down. Huang Yaoshi, his legs in a 'half-nail, half-V' stance, stepped eastward into a 'Z-tree' position. In a moment, the two men were about to use world-class martial arts to distinguish the strong and the weak, the living and the dead.

"Massacre me first!" giggled Huang Rong.

Qiu Qianren shook his head. "Young miss is so cute and lively," he said, "I almost can't bear to do it...Oh shit! Oh shit!" He was suddenly clutching his belly with both hands and bending over at the waist. "At this time, of all the rotten coincidences..."

"What?" said Huang Rong, puzzled.

"You wait a moment," said Qiu Qianren, a strained look on his face. "I've suddenly got a stomach-ache. I must be excused!"

Huang Rong spluttered, for once not knowing what to say. Qiu Qianren, his brows knitted in an expression of discomfort, gave another moan; clutching his crotch with both hands, he ran off to one side, a limp in his step. From the look of things, he'd had a sudden stomach-ache and, unable to hold it in, had pooped into his pants. Huang Rong, aghast, had a feeling that he was eight-tenths faking it. But worried that he really did have diarrhoea, she looked on wide-eyed and let him run past, not daring to get in his way.

Zhu Cong took out a piece of straw tissue from his pocket. With flying steps, he caught up with Qiu Qianren and tapped him on the shoulder, saying pleasantly: "Have some toilet paper."

"Thanks a lot," said Qiu Qianren. Going into some bushes by a tree, he squatted down.

Huang Rong picked up a stone and threw it at the small of his back, calling out: "Go a bit further!"

The stone was just about to hit Qiu Qianren when he reached behind with his hand and caught hold of it. "Does the smell offend you, miss?" he laughed. "I'll just go a bit further away, then. And the eight of you better wait for me; don't be taking the opportunity to slip away!" As he talked, he pulled up his pants and walked further and further; behind a line of low groves over ten zhang away, he squatted down again.

"Second teacher," said Huang Rong, "that old bastard wants to escape."

Zhu Cong nodded his head, remarking: "That old bastard might be thick-faced, but he's slow-footed, too; he won't be able to escape, I'm afraid." He added: "Here's a couple of things for you to play with."

Huang Rong saw that he had a sharp sword and a cast-iron palm in his hands, and knew that he'd lifted them off Qiu Qianren's person when he'd patted the oldie on the shoulder just now. From the secret room, she'd already witnessed Qiu Qianren fooling the Quanzhen Seven with the sword-stabbed-through-the-belly stunt; she'd known immediately that it was clearly a sham, but hadn't been able to guess its mechanism. Now, seeing straight away that the sword had a retractable blade in three sections of interlocking sheaths, she laughed so hard she fell over.



Then, she got the idea of messing with Ouyang Feng's mind. Going over to stand in front of him, she smiled and said: "Uncle Ouyang, I just can't bear to live!" Raising her right hand, she stabbed the sword violently into her stomach.

Both Huang Yaoshi and Ouyang Feng, who were just then accumulating power in preparation to attack, were shocked to see her do this. Huang Rong promptly held up the sword, showing off the three-section blade and pulling out the ensheathed tip, and laughing as she explained Qiu Qianren's trickery to her father.

"Could it be true," thought Ouyang Feng, "that this oldie has whipped up a phoney reputation, cheating his way to worldly renown with a lifetime of deception?"

Huang Yaoshi, noticing him slowly straightening to a stand, had already guessed what he was thinking. He took the cast-iron palm from his daughter's hands. The hollow of the palm, he noticed, was engraved with the word "Qiu", and the back of it had a carving in a wave pattern.

"This is the leadership token of Qiu Qianren, the Chief of Hunan's Iron Palm Gang," he said. "20 years ago, this token was really of the utmost significance in jianghu. No matter whose hands it was in, it brought an irresistible right of way, from as far east as Jiujiang to as far west as Chengdu; followers of both right and wrong would without exception offer awed obedience at the sight of it. In the past few years, the name of the Iron Palm Gang has long been unheard of, and it's unknown whether - or how - it's disbanded. Could this shameless, pathetic, big-talking oldie really be the owner of the token?" With doubts in his mind, he returned the iron palm to his daughter.

Seeing the iron palm, Ouyang Feng peered at it from the corners of his eyes, an expression of great surprise on his

face.

"This iron palm could turn out to be a lot of fun," giggled Huang Rong. "I want it! That deceitful guy has no further use for it." Lifting the three-section iron sword, she called out "Catch!" and raised her hand to throw it. But seeing the distance to Qiu Qianren was very far, she didn't have enough strength in her hands; her throw definitely wouldn't reach.

Smiling to her father, she handed him the sword. "Dad," she said, "you throw it to him!"

Huang Yaoshi, whose suspicions were aroused, had been intending a further test of whether or not Qiu Qianren had any real ability at all. Raising his left hand, he lay the iron sword flat atop his palm with the tip of the sword pointing away from him, and flicked its handle with the middle finger of his right hand. There was a light clang as the sword shot off sharply, faster and harder than if fired from a taut, powerful crossbow. Huang Rong and Guo Jing clapped their hands and cheered; Ouyang Feng, secretly shocked, thought: "What terrific Divine Flick skill!"

While they roared in acclaim, the sword flew straight at Qiu Qianren. When its tip appeared to be only metres from him, he remained squatting on the ground, unmoving; and in the blink of an eye, the point of the sword had already plunged into his back. Although the three-section sword wasn't sharp at all, this one flick from Huang Yaoshi had sent it in handle-deep. Even if it were a blade of wood or bamboo – let alone an iron sword – this oldie, if he wasn't dead, was surely heavily injured.

With flying steps, Guo Jing went over for a closer look. Suddenly, he gave a loud cry of astonishment. There was a yellow ko-hemp jacket on the ground; picking it up and

waving it in the air again and again, he shouted: "Oldie sneaked off long ago!"

As it happened, Qiu Qianren had taken off his jacket and hung it over the stem of a small tree – not only was he far apart from the others, the grass and woods were also blocking the view – and he'd somehow pulled off this 'moult of the golden cicada' trick. Just now, Huang Yaoshi and Ouyang Feng were concentrating on facing their opponent, their eyes on nothing else; and those two were in turn being watched by Zhu Cong and the rest. In the end, they'd all been deceived by Qiu Qianren. Eastern Heretic and Western Venom, giving each other a glance, couldn't help bursting simultaneously into loud laughter, both feeling secret cheer at having one less powerful enemy in the world.

Ouyang Feng knew that Huang Yaoshi was quick-witted in thought, and not straightforward like Hong Qigong; it wasn't easy to connive against him and succeed. But seeing him laughing in an easy-going manner, totally off-guard, how could he not take advantage of this opportunity to land a vicious strike? He gave three clanging laughs – a noise just like the din of gold clashing with iron – then stopped abruptly, as quick as lightning making a sudden bow low towards Huang Yaoshi.

Huang Yaoshi, still laughing with his head held high, raised his left palm sharply and clenched his right in a hook – and clasped his hands, returning the courtesy. Both men swayed slightly.

His surprise attack failing to connect, Ouyang Feng stood unmoving, before suddenly retreating three steps. "Heretic Huang," he shouted, "we'll meet again!" With a shake of his long sleeves, cloth swirled as he turned to go.

There was the faintest change of expression on Huang Yaoshi's face: he thrust out his left palm in front of his daughter, shielding her. Guo Jing had also recognised that Western Venom, in the midst of this turn, was stealthily unleashing his ruthless, sinister skills, and was about to use an Air-Splitting Palm-type technique to launch a sneak attack on Huang Rong. But both in reactions and making his move, he wasn't as quick as Huang Yaoshi; seeing the danger, it was already too late to help. So with a loud shout, he threw a double punch straight at Western Venom's stomach, hoping to force him to counterpunch in self-defence. The power applied in the sneak attack on Huang Rong would then not be enough.

The force unleashed by Ouyang Feng had just been repelled by Huang Yaoshi; exploiting the momentum, he immediately swung it around to attack Guo Jing instead. This move augmented the original force from himself with energy borrowed from Huang Yaoshi's block, amplifying its power. Guo Jing, in a critical position, ducked and rolled away. Leaping up afterwards, his face was already pale with shock.

"Good little boy!" swore Ouyang Feng. "I don't see you for a few days, and your skills improve yet again." Just now, his counterattacking move – borrowing an opponent's strength to injure another, an unfathomable variation delivered with unspeakable speed – had somehow been dodged by Guo Jing. That was completely beyond his expectations.

The Six Freaks of Jiangnan, seeing both sides go on the attack, had clustered into a semicircular barrier behind Ouyang Feng. Paying no attention to them in the slightest, he dashed straight through, taking big strides. Quan Jinfa and Han Xiaoying, not daring to obstruct him, stepped aside to get out of his way and watched wide-eyed as he left the forest.

If Huang Yaoshi had wanted to avenge Mei Chaofeng right now, he could have got everyone to join forces, surround Western Venom, and overwhelm him. But being proud and arrogant by nature, he was unwilling to let anyone say a word about him 'using the many to persecute the few', and would rather seek him out again in the future, alone. Following the figure of Ouyang Feng with his gaze, he gave a cold laugh.

Guo Jing, Quan Jinfa and the others untied Huazheng, Tuolei, Zhebie and Bo'erhu. Already beside themselves with joy at the sight of Guo Jing still alive, they loudly cursed Yang Kang for his deceitful rumourmongering. "That Yang character said that he had to hurry to Yuezhou for something," fumed Tuolei. "I thought he was just a decent person, so I wasted three fine horses on him as a gift."

Earlier, they'd been told of Guo Jing's tragic loss; in the midst of their grief they heard Yang Kang talking on and on about wanting to avenge his sworn brother, and had fallen for his spiel. That evening, while they were staying together at an inn in a small town north of Lin'an, Yang Kang had wanted to go and stab Tuolei to death. But he hadn't expected that Fatty and Skinny – the two beggars who'd seen him holding the stick of the Chief's authority – were guarding him vigilantly, taking turns on night watch outside his window. Yang Kang had several times been just about to launch his attack, only to see if not Fatty then Skinny, patrolling to and fro in the courtyard with blade in hand. After waiting a whole night and from start to finish not getting an opportunity, he just gave up; the next day, he cheated Tuolei out of three fine horses, and rode off westward along with the two beggars.

Tuolei and the others, unaware that the previous night they'd nearly died a brutal death, were about to head north when they saw the pair of white eagles turn around and fly

south. Waiting for half a day, there was no sign of them coming back. Tuolei knew that the eagles were unusually intelligent and that there must have been a reason for them to go south; as there was fortunately no urgency at all to return north, they therefore waited in the inn for a couple of days. When the third day arrived, the eagles suddenly flew back, crying incessantly at Huazheng. Tuolei and the others followed in a group as the pair of eagles led the way, once again travelling south. Unfortunately, they then chanced upon Qiu Qianren and Ouyang Feng in the forest.

The Jin Empire had conferred a mission upon Qiu Qianren: incite the champions in Jiangnan to get fired up against each other, so that the Jin army could come south. While talking trash to Ouyang Feng in the forest, he'd spotted Tuolei – the Mongolian ambassador – and, together with Ouyang Feng, had instantly gone on the attack. Although Zhebie and the others were extraordinarily brave, how were they a match for Western Venom? The two eagles had actually flown south because they'd discovered the tracks made by the Little Red horse, but had ended up unwittingly leading their master into a catastrophe. And if they hadn't brought Guo Jing and Huang Rong over just in time, Tuolei's entire group would have inadvertently lost their lives there and then in the forest. Of these particulars, there were some Huazheng knew of, and there were some she was oblivious to. Tugging at Guo Jing's hand, she chattered away endlessly. Huang Rong, seeing the manner between Huazheng and Guo Jing so intimate, was already somewhat unhappy. Even more uncomfortably, Huazheng was speaking entirely in Mongolian, which Huang Rong couldn't understand a single word of. She had become an outsider.

Huang Yaoshi noticed the odd expression on his daughter's face. "Rong'er," he asked, "who's this barbarian girl?"

“Brother Jing’s wife-to-be,” answered Huang Rong, morose.

Hearing this, Huang Yaoshi almost couldn’t believe his own ears. “What?” he asked, insistently.

Huang Rong hung her head. “Dad,” she said, “go and ask him for yourself.”

Zhu Cong, nearby, had recognised in advance that things were getting inauspicious, and hastened forward. Delicately, he raised the circumstances of Guo Jing’s already having gotten engaged with Huazheng earlier in Mongolia.

Huang Yaoshi, unable to restrain his anger, cast an accusing glance at Guo Jing. Icily, he said: “So it turns out that, before coming to Peach Blossom Island as a suitor, he’d already set on an engagement in Mongolia?”

“We ought to think of a...think of a way to satisfy both parties,” stuttered Zhu Cong.

“Rong’er,” said Huang Yaoshi sharply, “dad’s going to do something, and you’d better not get in the way.”

“Dad, what is it?” asked Huang Rong, her voice trembling.

“That disgusting boy, that worthless girl – I’ll slaughter both of them together!” said Huang Yaoshi. “How could we allow anyone to disgrace the two of us, father and daughter?”

Huang Rong dashed forward a step and grabbed her father’s right hand. “Dad,” she said, “Brother Jing said wholeheartedly that he really, really loves me – that he’s never taken this barbarian girl to heart!”

“Well, fine,” snorted Huang Yaoshi. Raising his voice, he shouted: “Boy, hurry up and kill the barbarian girl, to display evidence of your own feelings!”

Guo Jing had never in his entire life met with such an awkward situation. Naturally hesitant in his thoughts, he heard what Huang Yaoshi just said and felt totally at a loss; standing there in a daze, dumbfounded, he didn't know what to do.

"You'd already set on a marriage beforehand," continued Huang Yaoshi frostily, "yet you still came to me in suit! Whoever heard of such a thing?"

Seeing Huang Yaoshi's ashen expression, the Jiangnan Freaks knew that Guo Jing was one sudden flick of a palm away from fatal misfortune; furtively, each of them went on guard. But with their ability so far inferior by comparison, they'd actually be helpless to assist should the fighting get serious.

Guo Jing had always been unable to tell lies. Having heard these questions, he answered with the plain truth: "All I hoped for was to be with Rong'er for the rest of my life. Without Rong'er, there's no way I can live."

Huang Yaoshi's expression softened slightly. "Very well," he said. "If you don't kill this girl, that's fine; but from now on, you cannot ever see her again."

Guo Jing, faltering, had yet to respond, when Huang Rong asked: "You definitely need to see her, don't you?"

"I've always treated her just like a dear sister," said Guo Jing. "If I can't see her, sometimes I'd worry about her."

Huang Rong gave a beautiful smile. "Just see who you'd like to see - I don't mind!" she said. "I have faith that you don't really love her. And how could it be that I don't compare to her?"



"Fine!" said Huang Yaoshi. "I am here. The barbarian girl's family are here. And your six teachers are here, too. Now you better say it loud and clear: the one you want to marry is my daughter, and not that barbarian girl!" It was already greatly against his nature to concede repeatedly like this; but out of respect for his beloved daughter, he restrained himself with all his might, and tolerated it. His heart had also softened briefly since Mei Chaofeng lost her life while shielding her teacher.

Lost in thought, Guo Jing hung his head. Stashed around his waist, he glimpsed both the golden blade granted to him by Genghis Khan, and the small dagger gifted to him by Qiu Chuji.

"Going by the will of father," he pondered, "Yang Kang and I should be good brothers, not changing through life and death. But how can I keep faith in this tie if he acts like he does? And going by the will of Uncle Yang Tiexin, I should take Sister Mu as a wife. But that obviously can't be right. It looks like I don't always have to follow the orders laid down for me by elders. The engagement between myself and Sister Huazheng was made by Genghis Khan. How can it be that, because some person said a few words, Rong'er and I have to spend our lives apart?" Having thought this far, he'd already made up his mind. He raised his head.

By now, Tuolei had clarified with Zhu Cong what had been spoken about in the exchange between Huang Yaoshi and Guo Jing. He saw Guo Jing dithering and ruminating, seemingly embarrassed; and he realised that he truly felt no sentiments towards his sister. Bursting with rage, he took a long, wolf-fanged-and-vulture-plumed arrow out from his quiver, and gripped it in both hands.

"Brother Guo Jing!" he called out. "Everywhere under heaven, 'One's word is one's bond' is the conduct of the

true man! Now that you've treated my sister heartlessly, how could the heroic sons and daughters of Genghis Khan seek sincerity from you? The brotherly tie between you and me...from now, I demand it severed! As for the bond of life and death the two of us had when we were children, and also your saving the lives of father and me - let's keep kindness and grievance clearly separated. Because your mother's in the north, I'll certainly provide for her, properly and respectfully. But if you want to see her come south, I'll be sure to send people in escort. There won't be the least bit of neglect - no way! A real man's words are set in stone. You put your mind at rest!" Done with talking, there was a loud crack as he snapped the arrow in two, flinging the shards before the horse. Tuolei had spoken with a steely finality and an iron will. Deep down, Guo Jing felt in awe, and he suddenly recalled all kinds of heroic deeds that him and Tuolei had got up to during their youth in the great desert.

"He said: 'A real man's words are set in stone,'" thought Guo Jing. "The agreement to marry Sister Huazheng was from my own mouth. To go back on one's word - how is that the way to behave? Even if Master Huang kills me today and Rong'er hates me for the rest of her life, I can't be seeing it like that."

Immediately, he raised his head high. "Master Huang, my six kind teachers, Brother Tuolei, and masters Zhebie and Bo'erhu," he announced, "Guo Jing really isn't the type who has no honour, no virtue. I have to marry Sister Huazheng."

He made this announcement in Chinese, and separately, in Mongolian. For everyone, it was far off what they'd expected. Tuolei, Huazheng, Zhebie and Bo'erhu were surprised but delighted; the Jiangnan Freaks privately praised their disciple for being a true man of hard

backbone; and Huang Yaoshi, casting him a sideways glance, gave a cold sneer.

Huang Rong was deeply heartbroken. After a moment's pause, she took a few steps towards Huazheng, and assessed her carefully. She noticed Huazheng's athletic figure, her large eyes and dashing eyebrows, her features everywhere noble; and she couldn't help giving a long sigh.

"Jing gege," she said, "I understand. You and her are the same. The two of you are a pair of white eagles rising over the great desert. But I'm just a little swallow, sitting under a willow branch in Jiangnan."

Guo Jing stepped over to her. "Rong'er," he said, grasping her hands, "I don't know if what you said is right or wrong. In my heart, there's only you – and you know it! Who cares what others say we should or shouldn't do? They can burn my body 'til the ashes blow away, but I'll only be thinking of you!"

"Then why did you say that you'll marry her?" said Huang Rong, tears welling in her eyes.

"I am a fool," said Guo Jing. "I don't know about any reasoning. I only know this: the promises that you make, you just can't take back. But I'm not lying when I say that, no matter what, you're the only one in my heart. There's no way I can be apart from you. I would rather die!"

Huang Rong felt confusion inside – feelings of love and of pain. After a moment, she gave a faint smile. "Jing gege," she said, "if I'd known things would be this way, we'd never have returned from the 'Island of Rubicund Clouds'. Wouldn't that have been great?"

Huang Yaoshi, raising an eyebrow, suddenly shouted: "That's easy!" With a flap of his robe sleeves, he swung out

a hand chopping at Huazheng.

To Huang Rong, her old dad's intentions had been plain to see. Spotting a cold glint in his eyes, and knowing an attempt to kill was imminent, she'd pre-emptively dashed to obstruct him before he'd thrown out his hand. Huang Yaoshi, afraid of harming his beloved daughter, at once stopped his hand's momentum. Huang Rong had already grabbed Huazheng by the arm and pulled her off her horse when Huang Yaoshi's hand struck the horse on the saddle, making a loud noise.

Initially, the horse didn't seem unduly affected at all. But gradually, its head drooped and its legs bowed as it curled, paralysed, into a ball on the ground – where, in the end, it died. This was a sturdy horse from a renowned Mongolian breed; although it wasn't as fabulous as the treasured blood-sweating horse, it was still a fine, muscular animal, strong-boned and with a high, bulky body. But with just one wave of Huang Yaoshi's palm, it had died under his hand. Martial arts this extreme were a rare sight indeed. The hearts of Tuolei, Zhu Cong and all the others were pounding wildly; if, they thought, this hand had struck Huazheng, how would she have survived?

Huang Yaoshi hadn't expected his daughter would actually take action and rescue Huazheng. He was stunned for a moment, before understanding why: if he killed the barbarian girl, Guo Jing would surely turn against his daughter, and they'd become enemies. He snorted, thinking: "To turn against is to turn against; how could I even be scared of this boy?" But with one glance at his daughter, he saw her expression was one of misery and pain, but obviously also of feeling intertwined with someone in a thousand ways – unable to part, unable to leave. Deep down, he couldn't help trembling: this was exactly the same look that his wife, on the verge of death, had on her face.

Huang Rong had always been very similar in looks to her departed mother. Back then, that emotional event had affected Huang Yaoshi like a dementia, like a madness; although it had been fifteen years, every day since it was as if it was still right before his very eyes. Now, to see it suddenly appear on his daughter's face, made him realise that her feelings of love for Guo Jing were already rooted bone-deep. Reflecting that this was precisely the natural character of her father and mother – self-willed and disposed towards irresolvable passion – he gave a long sigh, and intoned:

*“Earth and heaven  
Are a stove,  
Nature is the worker!  
Yin and Yang are  
As charcoal,  
Thousand things are copper!”*

Huang Rong stood still, teardrops falling slowly.

Han Baoju gave Zhu Cong's lapels a tug. “What's he singing about?” he asked, in a whisper.

“It's from a composition written by someone called Jia, during the Han Dynasty,” answered Zhu Cong, also whispering. “It's saying that existence on this world – for mankind and the ten thousand creatures – is an anguish just like that of suffering incineration inside a huge furnace.”

“He's trained to such a high standard!” spluttered Han Baoju. “What anguish can he have?”

Zhu Cong, shaking his head, gave no response.

“Rong'er,” said Huang Yaoshi gently, “after we go back, you are never to see this boy again.”

"Dad, no!" said Huang Rong. "I still have to get to Yuezhou. Teacher told me to go and be the Chief of the Beggar Gang."

Huang Yaoshi smiled faintly. "Being the head of the tramps," he said, "is a serious hassle, and it's not much fun."

"I promised teacher I'd do it," said Huang Rong.

"Well, try it out for a few days, then," sighed Huang Yaoshi. "When you're really sick of it, hand it over to another straight away. And afterwards...are you going to see this boy or not?"

Huang Rong took a glance at Guo Jing and saw him gazing back at her. The look in his eyes was one of overflowing tenderness, of a love infinite in depth. She turned her head back towards her father.

"Dad," she said, "he's going to marry someone else; so I'll marry someone else, too. I'm the only one in his heart, just as he's the only one in my heart."

Huang Yaoshi laughed. "The daughter of Peach Blossom Island cannot lose out, so that's not too bad. Now, suppose the man you marry doesn't let you be friends with him...?"

Huang Rong gave a snort. "Who'd dare to stop me?" she said. "I'm your daughter!"

"Silly girl!" said Huang Yaoshi. "It won't be a few more years before dad dies."

"Dad!" sobbed Huang Rong. "The way you treat me, would I really be able to live on for much longer?"

"So are you still going to be with this heartless, faithless boy?" enquired Huang Yaoshi.

"Each extra day I stay with him is an extra day of happiness," said Huang Rong. She said this gently, but with an expression of utter misery.

While father and daughter asked and answered each other like this, the Jiangnan Freaks – despite being eccentric in character – couldn't help but listen agape. In the Song era, the proscriptions advised by propriety were followed with the most particularity; but because Huang Yaoshi was a man who 'opposed Tang and Wu and despised Zhou and Kong' and who perversely went against the conventions of the age, it had led to everyone calling him by the given title of "Eastern Heretic". As for Huang Rong, she'd been moulded by her father since youth, and regarded marriage as marriage and love as love; when had thoughts of rectitude and chastity ever passed through her little head? This kind of conversation, shocking by the standards of the time, would set tongues wagging incessantly in disapproval among anyone overhearing it. But father and daughter were even talking as if it were only natural – just like common, idle, household chat. Despite the open-mindedness of Ke Zhen'e and the others, they couldn't help shaking their heads quietly.

Guo Jing, who was feeling very bad, wanted to say a few comforting words to Huang Rong, but he'd always been wooden in speech. Now, he knew even less what was the right thing to say. Huang Yaoshi glanced at his daughter, then glanced at Guo Jing. Lifting his head towards the heavens, he suddenly roared long and loud. The sound shook the treetops and echoed from the mountain valley, startling some magpies; they rose in a flock and flew around the forest.

"Magpies, magpies!" called out Huang Rong. "The cowherd meets the weaving-girl tonight. Why no hurry to build the bridge?"

Huang Yaoshi grabbed a handful of loose stones from the ground and hurled them up into the air. One by one, a dozen magpies dropped, most dying where they fell. "What bridge is there to build?" shouted Huang Yaoshi. "Deep passion, great love: all empty fantasy in the end. More fitting that it die an early death!" He spun around and floated off. In just the space of a blink, the others saw his blue-robed figure disappear beyond the back of the woods.

Tuolei hadn't understood what they'd been talking about; he knew only that Guo Jing was unwilling to turn his back on agreements from the past. "Brother," he said, happily, "here's hoping you soon succeed with your big objective. See you again when you're back north!"

Huazheng added: "Keep this pair of white eagles by your side, and come back someday soon!"

Guo Jing nodded his head. "Tell my mum," he said, "that I'm sure I'll put the enemy to the blade, and get revenge for father."

Zhebie and Bo'erhu also took their leave of Guo Jing, and the four rode out of the forest together.

"What are your plans?" Han Xiaoying asked Guo Jing.

Guo Jing said: "I...I plan firstly to go and find Teacher Hong."

Ke Zhen'e nodded his head. "That's right," he remarked. "Master Huang went to our households; our families must have been very worried. We ought therefore to return. When you see Chief Hong, you must invite His Eminence to come to Jiaxing and convalesce. We'll keep a firm guard over him, and assure you his safety." Guo Jing promised to do so, took leave of his six teachers, and then returned to Lin'an with Huang Rong.



That evening, the two of them went back into the palace for a careful look around the imperial kitchens, but there was no sign of Hong Qigong anywhere. They found and interrogated several eunuchs, all of whom said that there hadn't been any intruders or trespassers appearing in the palace these past few days. Guo Jing and Huang Rong felt they could put their minds at rest somewhat. Although Hong Qigong had lost his martial arts, he still had the resourcefulness and experience of a great master; they expected he'd surely had a plan of escape. And by now, it was already drawing near to the time of the Beggar Gang's big meeting - they couldn't delay any longer. Early next morning, they immediately rode westward together. At this time, half of China was already occupied by the Jins, the boundary a line from the River Huai in the East to Sanguan in the West. What remained for those of the Southern Song were seventeen provinces in all: Eastern and Western Liangzhe; Eastern and Western Huainan; Eastern and Western Jiangnan; Northern and Southern Jinghu; Southern Jingxi; the five regions of Bashu; Fujian; and Eastern and Western Guangnan. (\*) The nation's influence was in faltering decline, its territory shrinking by the day.

On this particular day, Guo Jing and Huang Rong were coming to the border of Western Jiangnan province. (\*) While going along a mountain ridge, there was a sudden blast of cold wind across it, and a big layer of jet-black clouds came floating over fast from the east. Right now, it happened to be the height of summer, but rain falls as it pleases; even before the dark, rumbling clouds had arrived overhead, there was a thunderclap, and it was already showering down with soyabean-sized raindrops.

Guo Jing opened an umbrella and went to shelter Huang Rong with it, but a violent, unexpected gust of wind burst over, ripped off the parasol, and carried it far away, leaving

only a naked umbrella-handle in Guo Jing's hands. Huang Rong, laughing loudly, said: "How come you've got a Dog-Beating Stick, too?"

Guo Jing laughed with her. Looking ahead along the ridge, there was nowhere in sight where they could escape from the rain. Guo Jing took off his jacket, wanting to use it to shield Huang Rong. "We can cover up for a bit longer," said Huang Rong, smiling, "but we'll still get wet!"

"Then let's walk quicker," said Guo Jing.

Huang Rong shook her head. "Jing gege," she said, "here's a story from a book. One day, it was raining down hard. Everybody travelling on the road was rushing to and fro. But there was one man who just walked at an unhurried pace. The other people were surprised, and asked him why the heck he wasn't running. The man said: 'It's raining down hard ahead of me, too. Won't running over there still get me soaked just the same?'"

"True!" laughed Guo Jing.

The issue of Huazheng suddenly arose in Huang Rong's mind. "The future ahead is already doomed with misery and heartbreak," she thought. "No matter how we run, in the end we can't escape, can't hide. It's just as if we'd encountered rain while along the ridge of a mountain."

There amidst the downpour, the two of them walked slowly until they'd left the ridge. Seeing a peasant household, they went in to shelter from the rain. As both were totally soaked from head to toe, they changed into clothing borrowed from the peasant family. Huang Rong put on the worn garments of an old farmer's wife, which she found amusing, when suddenly she heard a series of disappointed groans from Guo Jing in the neighbouring room. Rushing over, she asked: "What is it?"

Guo Jing, an upset look on his face, had in his hands the painting given to him by Huang Yaoshi. It had so happened that the painting had been damaged by rainwater during the downpour just now. "What a shame!" repeated Huang Rong.

Taking the canvas from him for a look, she saw that its paper was torn, its strokes of paint blurred. There was already no way it could be refitted and restored. She was just about to put it down when she suddenly noticed that a few extra lines of dim writing had appeared by the side of the poem annotated by Han Shizhong. A closer look revealed that these words had been written on paper interlying between the painting and the sheet it had been mounted on; if it hadn't been for the painting getting soaked, they definitely wouldn't be visible. The disintegration of the rain-soaked paper had made the writing fragmented and difficult to distinguish, but by looking at the form in which it was arranged, Huang Rong could make out there were four sentences in all.

With careful discernment, she read out slowly:

*"...posthumous writings of the late...,  
iron palm...,  
Middle...peak,  
Second...joint."*

The remaining words were so damaged that there was absolutely no way they could be identified.

"It's about The Posthumous Writings of the Late General!" called out Guo Jing.

"Indeed!" said Huang Rong. "There's no doubt. That bastard Wanyan Honglie assumed the Writings were hidden by the side of the palace's Cuihan Hall. But although he got the stone box, the Writings were nowhere to be seen. It

looks like the location of the Writings hinges critically on these four lines of text."

After murmuring "...iron palm...middle...joint..." for a while, she added: "That day at The Villa of the Gathering Clouds, at one point I heard Martial Brother Lu and your six teachers discussing that deceitful guy, Qiu Qianren. They said he was the Chief of the Iron Palm Gang or something. Daddy said that the might of the Iron Palm Gang rocked Sichuan and Hunan; its prestige and reputation really were awesome. Could it be that the Writings actually have something to do with Qiu Qianren?"

Guo Jing shook his head. "As long as it's Qiu Qianren playing up," he said, "I'm not believing any of it!"

"I wouldn't believe it either!" said Huang Rong, with a little laugh.

On the fourteenth day of the seventh month, they arrived within the borders of Northern Jinghu province. (\*) The next day, before the stroke of noon, they'd already reached Yuezhou. Leading their horses and loosing the eagles, they asked around for directions, and came by path to Yueyang Tower.

After going up into a nearby restaurant and ordering food and drink, they admired the scenery of Dongting Lake: a sweeping vastness of one blue-green hue spread across ten thousand qing. Towering mountains stood out in every direction, a ring of misty, lofty peaks arrayed in an arc of awe-inspiring majesty. Compared to the hazy waters of Tai Lake, this spectacle was something else entirely. While they enjoyed the view, the food arrived. The cuisine of Hunan was very heavily spiced, and Guo Jing and Huang Rong both felt that it wasn't to their taste; but with such big dishes and such long chopsticks, it nevertheless had a rather

generous spirit to it. The two of them ate some of the food and looked around at the verses inscribed on the four walls. Guo Jing perused Fan Zhongyan's Remarks on Yueyang Tower in silence, but he couldn't help reading out loud when he reached the sentence:

*"Be first under heaven to worry,  
And last under heaven to rejoice."*

"What do you think about this couplet?" asked Huang Rong.

Guo Jing re-read it silently, pondering to himself and giving no immediate response.

"The writer of this essay was Fan, 'The Just Official'," said Huang Rong. "At that time, he rocked the Western Xia with his might; a literary talent and an astute tactician, you could say that he had absolutely no equal on earth."

Guo Jing asked her to describe some of Fan Zhongyan's achievements, and listened as she talked about his various childhood hardships – the poverty of his family, the early death of his father, the remarriage of his mother – and, after he'd attained wealth and honour, everything he did in consideration for the commonfolk. A grave feeling of reverence rising unstoppably within him, Guo Jing solemnly poured a ricebowlful of wine. "'Be first under heaven to worry, and last under heaven to rejoice.'" he said. "This is surely what's in the mind of great heroes and great champions!" With that, he lifted his head and drained the wine in a single shot.

Huang Rong laughed. "Although this sort of person is good for sure," she said, "there's so much worry under heaven – and so little joy – that wouldn't he never get to rejoice in his life? I couldn't be like that." Guo Jing gave a slight smile.

“Jing gege,” continued Huang Rong, her voice getting lower, “I don’t care whether there’s worry or joy under heaven. If you aren’t by my side, I’m never going to be joyful.” Her brows were knitted with despair.

“I won’t be joyful either,” remarked Guo Jing, hanging his head. He knew that she was thinking about how the two of them were going to end up, and he had no way of comforting her.

Huang Rong suddenly raised her head and laughed. “Never mind!” she said. “All this is childishness, anyway. Have you heard anyone sing Fan Zhongyan’s poem Spurn the Silver Lantern?”

“I haven’t heard it, of course!” said Guo Jing. “Could you tell it to me?”

Huang Rong said: “The concluding passage of the poem goes like this:

*‘The life of man is but  
A hundred years in all;  
Infatuated youth  
Ends up with aged pall.  
Only in between there’s time,  
Briefly youthful in one’s prime.  
Why grasp on fleeting fame, catch hold  
Of first-class rank and thousand gold?  
For how to flee white hairs of old?’”*

She followed this by explaining the general meaning of the poem.

Guo Jing commented: “He was telling people not to waste their best years by using them up in seeking fame, gaining office, getting rich, and so on. And that’s very well said.”

Huang Rong, in a whisper, recited:

*"Wine into the worried stomach  
Changes into lovesick tears."*

Guo Jing gazed at her. "Is that a poem of Fan Zhongyan, too?" he asked.

"Yes," said Huang Rong. "Great heroes and great champions also aren't the heartless sort, you know."

The two of them drank a few cups to each other, and Huang Rong had a look at the guests in the restaurant. On the eastern side, she saw three middle-aged beggars sitting around a square table; although they wore many patches, their clothes were clean and fresh. By the look of them, they were important figures within the Beggar Gang who'd come to attend tonight's big meeting. Besides them, the other guests were all the usual officials and merchants. The incessant chirp of cicadas could be heard coming from a big willow tree outside the restaurant.

"All day long," said Huang Rong, "these cicadas call out 'zhi le, zhi le' endlessly, but whatever they know is unknown. Basically, even among insects there are guys who boast shamelessly. It makes me think of a particular person, and I rather miss him."

"Who?" demanded Guo Jing.

"That big talker of bull," said Huang Rong, smiling, "the Iron Palm's Qiu 'Floats-Over-Water' Qianren!"

Guo Jing laughed loudly. "That old trickster...!" he began.

He hadn't finished speaking when suddenly, from a corner of the restaurant, they heard somebody speaking in a mysterious voice: "Looking down even on 'Floats-Over-Water' Elder Qiu of Iron Palm? That's some big talk!" Guo

Jing and Huang Rong glanced at where the voice was coming from and saw a middle-aged beggar, with a swarthy complexion and clad in a tattered jacket, squatting by the corner and looking at them in snickering laughter.

Guo Jing, seeing that he was a Beggar Gang figure, immediately relaxed. Noticing that he had an agreeable expression, Guo Jing clasped his hands in respect and said: "Senior, how about joining us and drinking a cup or three?"

"Sure!" said the beggar, coming over at once.

Huang Rong ordered an extra cup and set of chopsticks from a waiter. Pouring the cup with wine, she said with a smile: "Please take a seat, and drink up!"

"Beggar here doesn't deserve a seat," he answered. Sitting right there on the floorboards, he took out a broken bowl and a pair of bamboo chopsticks from a pocket. Extending the bowl, he said: "The leftovers you're finished with - dump some over, and they'll do for me."

"That'd be a bit too disrespectful!" said Guo Jing. "Whatever dishes senior would like to eat, we'll order them up from the kitchen."

"A beggar does as a beggar looks," said the beggar. "If he's one in name only - just feigning the accent and affecting the appearance - might as well not be a beggar. If you agree to hand it out, then hand it out. If not, I'm going someplace else to beg for food!"

Huang Rong took a glance at Guo Jing. "Indeed!" she laughed. "You said it right!" They then tipped all their leftover food into the broken bowl. The beggar grabbed a few clumps of cold rice from inside a pocket and, along with the leftovers, began eating them up zestfully.



Secretly, Huang Rong counted the number of pockets on him: there were three pockets to a cluster, and three clusters in total – in sum, nine pockets. Having another look at the three beggars around the other table, each of them was wearing nine pockets as well, but on their table was a lavish spread of food and drink. Those three acted as if they hadn't seen this one beggar, and all along had never so much as glanced at him; but at times, their expressions carried a faint look of disgust.

As the beggar continued eating heartily, they suddenly heard the sound of footsteps on the staircase, and three people started coming up. Guo Jing turned his head and looked towards the stairs.

The first two people were Fatty and Skinny, the two beggars who'd attended Yang Kang at Lin'an's Ox Village. The third person was Yang Kang himself. Poking his head up, he got a big shock at the sudden sight of Guo Jing, still alive; after a moment of panic, he abruptly turned back and descended the stairs in terror, speaking about something as he left. Fatty followed him down, but Skinny went over to the table of the three beggars and said a few things to them in a low voice. The three immediately stood up and departed down the stairs. Meanwhile, the beggar sitting on the floor just carried on eating, taking no notice of them at all.

Huang Rong went over to the window and looked down from it, seeing Yang Kang – thronged by a dozen beggars – departing westward. He hadn't gone far when he turned his head and glanced up. Happening to make eye contact with Huang Rong, he looked away instantly and quickened his pace.

The beggar, having finished eating his meal, licked the bottom of the bowl clean and clear with his extended tongue, gave his chopsticks a few wipes on his clothing, and

put everything into a pocket. Huang Rong looked at him carefully. His face, covered with wrinkles, expressed anxiety and hardship; his hands were unusually big – almost double those of an ordinary person – and on their backs were raised blue veins, attesting to a lifetime of hard toil.

Guo Jing stood up and folded his hands in respect. “Senior,” he said, “please take a seat and we can have a talk.”

“I’m not used to sitting on stools!” laughed the beggar. “You two are the disciples of Chief Hong; although you’re young, we’re actually in the same generation. But as I’m older by several years, you can address me as ‘big brother’. My name’s ‘Lu’; I’m called ‘Lu Youjiao’.”

Guo Jing and Huang Rong cast a glance at each other, both thinking: “So he already knows our background!”

“Big Brother Lu,” said Huang Rong with a smile, “this name of yours really is interesting!”

Lu Youjiao answered: “It’s often said: ‘A pauper without a stick gets harassed by the dogs.’ I’m indeed without a stick, but what I do have is a pair of stinky feet. If a doggie comes to harass me, I take aim straight at the mongrel’s head, and that son-of-a-b\*\*\*h gets a foot like so! Then, it’s off running to the wilds with its tail between its legs.”

Huang Rong laughed and clapped her hands. “Super, super!” she said. “If dogs knew the meaning of your name, they’d always be keeping their distance!”

“From what Brother Li Sheng’s been saying,” remarked Lu Youjiao, “I know the deeds the two of you did at Baoying. ‘Having ideals comes not from having advanced years; lacking ideals, one lives to a hundred in vain.’ How true! It really is a cause for admiration. No wonder Chief Hong has

favoured you like this!" Guo Jing rose and demurred modestly.

Lu Youjiao continued: "Just now, I heard you two chatting about Qiu Qianren and the Iron Palm Gang. It seems you're very much unaware of his circumstances."

"True," said Huang Rong. "I ought to ask for your advice."

"Qiu Qianren is the Chief of the Iron Palm Gang," said Lu Youjiao. "This Gang holds huge influence in the regions of Hunan, Hubei and Sichuan. The Gang's hordes commit murder and robbery; there's no evil they won't do. At first, they used to collaborate with local officials. Now, they're getting nastier and nastier – bringing out the cash to bribe ministers, they're starting to become officials themselves. Even more despicable is their secret liaison with the Jin nation, with whom they've struck a deal to work from within in accord with those outsiders."

"That oldie Qiu Qianren is only good at tricking people," said Huang Rong. "How'd he be able to handle such serious power?"

"Qiu Qianren is dangerous in the extreme!" insisted Lu Youjiao. "You ought not to look askance at him, miss."

Huang Rong smiled. "Have you met him?" she asked.

"As it turns out, no," admitted Lu Youjiao. "I hear he lives in seclusion among obscure mountains, practicing The Divine Art of the Iron Palm; he hasn't descended for at least a decade."

"You've been tricked!" said Huang Rong, laughing. "I've met him a few times. I've even fought him. And as for whatever 'Divine Art of the Iron Palm'..." Remembering

how Qiu Qianren had feigned diarrhoea and run away, all she could do was just gaze at Guo Jing and giggle.

Lu Youjiao gave her a stern look. He stated: "Although I'm not aware of what dirty tricks they've been playing, the Iron Palm Gang has rather flourished in recent years; you really ought not to belittle them lightly."

"Well said, Big Brother Lu!" offered Guo Jing hurriedly, worried he was getting angry. "Rong'er just loves to joke around."

"Since when was I joking around?" said Huang Rong with a laugh. Clutching her abdomen and imitating Qiu Qianren's voice, she added: "Ouch, ouch! I've got a stomach-ache!" Her antics made Guo Jing recall that particular spectacle, and he couldn't help letting out a laugh too.

Huang Rong saw he was laughing as well, but instantly restrained her mirth and changed the subject by asking: "Big Brother Lu, are you acquainted with those three who were dining here just now?"

Lu Youjiao gave a sigh. "The two of you aren't outsiders," he said, "so you may have already heard Chief Hong mention the internal division of our Gang into two groups: the 'Clean Clothes' and 'Dirty Clothes' factions."

"Haven't heard teacher talk of it," said Guo Jing and Huang Rong together.

"The division within the Gang is fundamentally not a good thing," said Lu Youjiao. "Chief Hong is extremely unhappy about it. His Eminence has expended an enormous amount of thought and effort, but all along hasn't been able to get these two factions to join together as one. Now, under Chief Hong, the Beggar Gang has four elders in all..."

"This I've heard teacher mention," interjected Huang Rong. Because Hong Qigong was still in this world, she didn't want to raise the issue of him having charged her with taking over the Chief's position.

Lu Youjiao nodded his head. "I'm the fourth-ranked elder," he continued. "All those three who were here just now are also elders."

"I get it!" said Huang Rong. "You're the head of the 'Dirty Clothes' faction, and they're of the 'Clean Clothes' faction!"

"Eh? How did you know?" asked Guo Jing.

"Look how dirty Big Brother Lu's clothes are!" said Huang Rong. "But the others' clothes were really clean. Big Brother Lu, I reckon the 'Dirty Clothes' faction are no good; dressing so stinkily, so sloppily – it isn't comfortable in the slightest! People in this faction of yours should wash their clothes more often. Wouldn't that just make both factions the same?"

Lu Youjiao was furious. "You're a little miss from a moneyed family," he fumed. "Of course you'd be annoyed by stinking beggars!" With a stamp of a foot, he stood up. Guo Jing moved to apologise for the offence, but the angry Lu Youjiao just stormed off down the stairs, without even turning his head.

Huang Rong stuck out her tongue. "Jing gege," she said, "I offended that Big Brother Lu. Don't tell me off."

Guo Jing just smiled.

Huang Rong added: "I was really worried just now."

"Worried about what?" said Guo Jing.

Huang Rong had a serious expression. “Just worried he’d lift up his foot and give you a kick. Wouldn’t that have been awful for you?”

“Why’d he kick me all of a sudden?” asked Guo Jing. “Even if you said something to offend him, there’s still no use kicking people.”

Huang Rong, pursing her lips with a slight smile, didn’t respond. Guo Jing just sat there in stupefaction, pondering uncomprehendingly.

Huang Rong sighed, and said: “Why don’t you think a little about what his name implies?”

Guo Jing had a sudden realisation. “So!” he shouted. “This is your roundabout way of calling me a dog!” He leaped up, motioning to tickle her as punishment. Huang Rong, giggling, dodged his outstretched hands.

**End of Chapter 26.**

## **Chapter 27 - In front of the Xuanyuan Platform**

**Translated by Gimel Gimeno & Frans Soetomo**



*Four young beggars, each with an unsheathed blade were guarding at their sides. Huang Rong turned her body around and was stunned. As it turned out, they were at the top of a small peak. In the moonlight she clearly saw lake water all around them. There was a tall platform a dozen zhang's away. The area around the platform was packed with row after row of hundreds of beggars.*

While the two were joking around, there were footsteps coming from the staircase, the three old beggars who just went out with Yang Kang returned. They walk straight towards Guo Jing and Huang Rong's table then bowed in respect. The middle beggar had fair skin and plump, his face was full of white beard. If his clothes were not full of patches, he would look like a rich and noble gentleman. He smiled before he even spoke; his face was gay and friendly, he said, "That beggar surnamed Lu has just secretly carried out his poisonous hand against the two of you. We did not like what we saw; therefore, we come here to help."

Guo Jing and Huang Rong were startled, they asked, "What poisonous hand?"

That beggar asked, "That old beggar was not willing to dine with you, was he?"

Huang Rong shivered with fear, she asked, "Did he put poison in our food?"

The beggar sighed and said, "It is our Beggar Clan's misfortune that we have such crafty traitor among us. This old beggar is highly skilled in using poison; as soon as his finger lightly flicked, the poison hidden in his finger nail would immediately mixed with the food and wine; even a



deity would not suspect. Your poisoning is already deep; in an hour time nobody would be able to save your lives."

Huang Rong did not believe what he said, she asked, "We do not have any enmity against him, why would he poison us?"

The beggar replied, "Most likely you two said something offensive to him. Please hurry and take this antidote, only then the two of you can be saved." After speaking he took out a package of powdered medicine from his pocket and put it into two wine cups and poured the wine in then he implored Jing, Rong two people to drink it immediately.

Just a moment ago Huang Rong saw them went to see Yang Kang, she was suspicious. How could they take some medicine just like that based on what he just said? So she asked, "That gentleman surnamed Yang is our acquaintance. Could the three of you invite him to come and see us?"

"Of course," that beggar replied, "But that traitorous disciple's poison is too severe. You should take this antidote quickly, or otherwise it will be too late."

Huang Rong said, "We are extremely grateful for your good intention. Would you please sit down and drink several cups with us? I often thought about the Beggar Clan's eleventh Clan Leader single handedly battled a group of warriors at Beigu Mountain; using only a stick and his pair of palms to strike down the five tyrants of Luoyang; what a hero he was."

During the time she and Guo Jing were together with Hong Qigong binding some woods to make a raft at MingXia [Bright Red Cloud] island, Hong Qigong would often tell her stories about some past major events within the Beggar Clan, so she would not be completely ignorant when she

became the Clan Leader in the future. That Beggar Clan's eleventh Clan Leader's achievement was one of the stories she heard from Hong Qigong. When the three old beggars heard her suddenly talk about former Clan Leader they look at each other in astonishment, they were wondering how a youngster like her would know about such matter.

Huang Rong again said, "The Hong Bangzhu's [Clan Leader] Eighteen Dragon Subduing Palms have no equal under the heaven, I wonder how many stances have the three of you learned?"

Ashamed look appeared on the three beggars' faces; they had not learned even one stance from the Clan Leader's Eighteen Dragon Subduing Palms, they were inferior even from an eight-bag disciple Li Sheng who mastered one stance 'Divine Dragon Swings its tail'.

Huang Rong continued, "That Lu Zhanglao [Elder Lu] who poisoned us just a moment ago; I think his skill is just ordinary. Last month the Western Poison Ouyang Feng invited me to drink three poisoned wine, now that was somewhat better. Why don't you drink these two cups of poisoned wine yourselves?" She shoved the two cups with powdered medicine in front of the three beggars.

The three beggars' countenances slightly changed; they knew she was purposely talking nonsense and was not willing to drink the medicine. The Elder with the rich man appearance smiled and said, "Miss is suspicious, naturally we cannot force you. Only our good intention will be wasted. Let me just show one thing to convince Miss. Please take a look at my eyes; tell me if you see anything unusual."

Guo Jing and Huang Rong looked at his eyes, only to see a pair of narrow eyes on the middle of a meaty fat face, like a pair of two slits on his face; but the eyeballs were

glistening, they looked very clear and bright. "What's so strange about his eyes?" Huang Rong wondered in her heart, "They look like a pair of sparkling pig eyes."

That beggar continued, "You two look into my eyes, surely you may not lose your concentration. Now you are feeling your eyelids are heavy, your minds are losing consciousness, your whole bodies are tired and weary; these are the signs of poisoning. Just close your eyes to sleep." His voice was soothing and pleasing to the ears while intoxicating at the same time, making Guo Jing and Huang Rong felt really tired and sleepy; as if their strength was drained from their bodies. Huang Rong slightly felt something was wrong; she tried to turn her head to avoid gazing at his eyes, but it seemed like she captivated by his eyes, she could not help looking back at him.

That beggar again said, "We are here by the lake side, the air is so cool and refreshing. You two should sleep soundly in this cool breeze. Sleep! Sleep! It is extremely comfortable. Sleep nicely!" As he spoke, his voice sounded increasingly gentle, sweet, and soothing. Guo Jing and Huang Rong unconsciously yawned repeatedly, put their heads down on the table and fell fast asleep.

Without knowing how many hours had passed, two people finally woke up dazed and confused; cool breeze caressed their bodies, made them feel the chill in the air. Their ears faintly heard a noise similar the sound of waves of the ocean. Slowly they opened their eyes and saw a clear bright moon that just rose up behind the eastern side of the mountain amidst a cloudy fog.

Two people were very shocked. The sun was still high up when they were drinking wine at the front of the tavern at Yueyang, how come in a blink of an eye the sky had turned dark? Dazed and confused they tried to stand up, they were

even more shocked to feel their hands and feet were bound by ropes. They tried to shout but their mouths were stuffed with cloths, pricking and hurting their tongues. Huang Rong knew it must be that white and fat beggar; but how he did it, she had no idea, for in that moment she could not think too much. She cast a sidelong glance and saw Guo Jing lying beside her, making an effort to struggle free; her anxiety was, for the most part, gone.

By this time Guo Jing had already possessed a powerful internal energy, he was able to break an even stronger rope. Who would have thought that as he exerted strength to his hands and feet, the rope on his body created 'zheng, zheng' noise, the rope was not damaged. Turned out it was made from braided cow rawhide mixed with steel wire.

Guo Jing wanted to add his strength and try again, unexpectedly he felt something cold on his face; a piece of ice-cold sword blade was softly patted twice on his cheek. He turned his head and saw four young beggars, each with an unsheathed weapon guarding them at their sides. He had no choice but stopped struggling. He turned his head to look at Huang Rong.

Huang Rong calmed herself down; she knew she needed to assess the overall situation first, and then try to find a way to escape. She turned her body around and was stunned. Turned out they were at the top of a small peak. Under the moonlight she clearly saw lake water all around them. A thin fog hung low on ten of thousands 'qing' [unit of area, 1 qing is approximately 6.67 Hectares or 16.47 acres] of bluish green waves. She thought, "It turns out that we are captured and brought to the Mount Jun's peak on Dongting Lake. How come I didn't feel anything along the way?"

She turned her head again and saw there was a tall platform a dozen of 'zhang's away. The area around the

platform was packed with rows after rows of hundreds of beggars. They sat quietly; the moonlight had not illuminated these people yet, which was the reason why Huang Rong did not notice them previously. She was inwardly happy, "Ah, right! Today is the fifteenth day of the seventh month; it's the Beggar Clan General Assembly. I must think of a way to speak, then I'll pass down Shifu's command, how can the beggars here refuse to accept?"

After a long time, the group of beggars still had not shown any activity. Huang Rong could not bear it any longer, but she could not move and had to endure patiently. About half an hour later, her limbs went numb. She saw the moon slowly rose to the middle of the sky, illuminating half of the tall platform. Huang Rong thought, "Li Tai wrote a poem, 'Pale moon swept through the lake, the surface was clear like a jade mirror, standing on Mount Jun painting a picture.' He went up the mountain to enjoy the moon that night, so free and unrestrained. Tonight the scenery is the same, but Jing Gege and I are bound in here. It really is irritating and funny at the same time!"

The moonlight slowly moved, shining on the three characters written on the side of the platform, 'xuan yuan [a name for the Yellow Emperor] tai' [platform]. Huang Rong recalled the story told by her father about great tales of the Jianghu world. Legend has it that the Huang Di [Yellow Emperor] cast [the word 'cast' here is as in 'casting metal from a mold'] a Ding [tripod, used for drinking utensil. From Wikipedia: a type of ancient Chinese vessel with three legs] on the bank of the Dongting lake. When the ding was finished, he rode a dragon and ascended to the heaven. She believed this platform was built to commemorate that event.

About the time it took to make tea later, the tall platform was completely engulfed by the bright moon. Suddenly she

heard 'bonk, bonk, bonk' three times then it stopped, then 'bonk, bonk, bonk' again. This pattern was repeated, sometimes slow sometimes fast, sometimes high, sometimes low, as if it followed certain rhythm. Turned out each one of the beggars held a small stick in their hands and they tapped the mountain rock in front of them. Huang Rong silently counted the tapping, she counted nine by nine, eighty one times when the noise stopped and four people stood up from the crowd of beggars. Under the bright moonlight she could see them clearly; they were Lu Youjiao and the three elders from the Clean Clothes Faction.

These four beggar elders walked towards the Xuanyuan Platform and stood on its four corners. The crowd of beggars also stood up and cupped their fists across their chests, bowing in respect. The white fat beggar waited until the crowd was seated and then with a clear voice said, "Brothers, the Beggar Clan met a disaster, an astronomical catastrophe, our Hong Lao Bangzhu [Old Clan Leader Hong] returned to heaven in Lin'an prefecture!"

At this word, the crowd of beggars fell into a complete silence. Suddenly someone cried out and threw himself to the ground. Everywhere the beggars beat their chests and stomped their feet, crying and wailing loudly. The noise of grieving shook the forest and echoed back from the surface of the lake down below.

Guo Jing was shocked, "We tried to find Shifu everywhere and could not find him, turned out he has passed away." He could not help shedding some tears, only his mouth was stuffed with some cloths, or else he would have wailed out too. Huang Rong meanwhile thought: "This fat guy is not a good person, he employed a nefarious way to capture us. I doubt it if we can believe what he said; he must be spreading up false rumors."

The crowd of beggars remembered Hong Qigong's kindness, everybody cried out louder and louder. Suddenly Lu Youjiao called out, "Peng Zhanglao, who personally saw Bangzhu returned to heaven?"

That white and plump Peng Zhanglao replied, "Lu Zhanglao, if Bangzhu was still alive; who has eaten leopard's gall and tiger's heart, dared to put a curse on him? The one who saw him returning to heaven is here. Yang Xianggong [honorable master], would you please tell the brothers here?"

Someone stood up from among the crowd of beggars; it was none other than Yang Kang. With the dark green bamboo stick in his hand he walked to the front of the platform. The crowd of beggars grew quiet, except for some continuing soft sobbing noise here and there.

Yang Kang slowly said, "About a month ago Hong Bangzhu was having a martial art contest with someone in Lin'an prefecture; unfortunately he lost and was killed."

As the crowd of beggars listened to him, their anger rose; one after another they shouted, "Who is the enemy? Tell us! Tell us!" "Bangzhu had divine power, how could he lose?" "Certainly the enemy ambushed him; our Bangzhu was overwhelmed by sheer numbers."

After Guo Jing listened to Yang Kang's speech, his grief turns to anger; immediately his heart was relieved and he thought, "A month ago, Shifu was obviously with us. Turned out he is just talking nonsense."

Meanwhile Huang Rong thought, "This kid must be a follower of the old swindler Qiu Qianren; he has completely mastered his stinky skill of spreading lies and deceiving people."

Yang Kang spread out both of his hands, waiting for the crowd of beggars to calm down, then he continued, "The ones who killed Bangzhu is the Peach Blossom Island's Master, the Eastern Heretic Huang Yaoshi, and the Quanzhen Sect's seven thieves."

Huang Yao Shi had not left his island for some time; therefore, nine out of ten beggars did not know much about his reputation. The Quanzhen Seven Masters' prestige, however, had shaken the world far and wide. The beggars who attended this general assembly on Mount Jun today were not rookies within the Beggar Clan; naturally they understood very well Quanzhen Seven Masters' capability. They did not care what kind of man Huang Yaoshi was, but if the Quanzhen Seven Masters joined hands, although Bangzhu's martial art was outstanding, he was but one person and certainly not their match. Everyone was very grieved and angered. Some opened up their mouths to curse, some others stood up and wanted to go to avenge their Clan Leader.

Actually Yang Kang heard Ouyang Feng said that he had severely injured Hong Qigong with his Toad Stance and that Hong Qigong's life was difficult to protect. He also thought that he had stabbed Guo Jing to death inside the imperial palace; who would have thought that they met again at the tavern in Yueyang city. He was shocked; thereupon he incited the three Beggar Clan's Elders to find a way to capture those two people with the intention of killing them later. He believed if today's matter would someday leak out to Huang Yaoshi, the Quanzhen Seven Masters and the Six Freaks of Jiangnan; they would certainly find him to seek revenge. The Six Freaks' martial art skills were not too high, so he was not afraid of them; but the Eastern Heretic and the Seven Masters were not a small matter. Thereupon he deliberately put the blame on Hong Qigong's murder on



their shoulders, so that the Beggar Clan would get out of their nest in full strength. With one swoop the Peach Blossom Island and the Quanzhen Sect would be destroyed and he would be saved from his trouble.

Amidst the clamoring noise of the beggars, Jian Zhanglao rose up from his corner on the east and said, "Brothers, listen to what I say." This man's beard and eyebrows were white, he was rather short; but as he opened his mouth the crowd grew silent, revealing his prominent position in the Beggar Clan. They heard him said, "Presently we have two important matters. First, we must follow Bangzhu's last order to elect the Nineteenth Clan Leader. Second, we must discuss how we are going to seek revenge for Bangzhu." The crowd of beggars shouted their approvals.

Lu Youjiao spoke loudly, "But first we must hold a memorial service for Lao Bangzhu's brave soul." He scooped some dirt from the ground and kneaded it into a clay figurine, treated it as Hong Qigong's image. He put the figurine on the side of Xuanyuan Platform and then he knelt down and cried. The crowd of beggars broke out into weeping and wailing again.

Huang Rong thought, "Shifu is alive and well; what do these stinky beggars cry for? Humph, without any reason you captured and bound Jing Gege and me, and now you are grieving for nothing. You get what you deserve."

After the crowd of beggars cried their hearts out, Jian Zhanglao clapped his hands three times; the beggars collected themselves and stopped crying. Jian Zhanglao said, "Brothers, in the Mount Jun General Assembly at Yuezhou today we were supposed to listen to Hong Bangzhu appoint his successor. It appeared Lao Bangzhu had met some unfortunate incidents and had returned to heaven; so we must make decision based on Lao Bangzhu's

last order. If he did not leave any order, then the Four Elders will convene and elect the new Bangzhu. This is in accordance with the custom the Beggar Clan observes from generation to generation. Brothers, isn't this so?" The crowd of beggars voiced their agreement.

Peng Zhanglao said, "Yang Xianggong, just before he returned to heaven, what is Lao Bangzhu's last order? Will you please tell us?"

Electing the new Clan Leader was the Beggar Clan's number one priority. The Beggar Clan's prosperity or decline, its success or failure, for the most part depended on the Clan Leader's virtue and capability. In the past the seventeenth Clan Leader, Qian Bangzhu, was dim and spiritless; his martial art skill was high, but he handled matters improperly. The Clean Clothes Faction and the Dirty Clothes Faction had endless fights; hence the Beggar Clan power suffered a large decline. When Hong Qigong assumed the Clan Leader position he forcefully suppressed the internal strife between these two factions. The Beggar Clan once again arose to become a strong organization within the Jianghu.

These past events were known to the group of beggars attending the assembly; as they heard that they were about to receive the order of their Clan Leader, they listened with complete attention, holding their breaths and not making any noise.

Yang Kang grabbed the green bamboo stick with both hands and lifted it high up above his head. With a clear and bright voice he said, "Hong Bangzhu was surrounded by traitors and suffered heavy injury; his life was in terrible danger. I hid him in the cellar of my humble home from the pursuing traitors. Immediately I called for a famous doctor

to treat the Hong Bangzhu's injury. Unfortunately his injury was too heavy and we were unable to save his life."

Listening to this point the beggars broke out in sobs. Yang Kang paused for moment before continuing, "Just before he died, Hong Bangzhu handed over this bamboo stick and ordered me to bear the heavy responsibility by becoming the Beggar Clan's nineteenth clan leader."

Listening to this, the beggars were surprised; they never had thought that the heavy responsibility of the Beggar Clan Leader could be entrusted to this youngster with playboy appearance.

At Qu Shagu's inn in the Ox Village of Lin'an Yang Kang had accidentally acquired this green bamboo stick. Then he noticed how the fat and skinny two beggars were exceptionally respectful toward him. He was astonished, but did not reveal anything to those two beggars. Along the way he fished for information on the origin of that bamboo stick. The two beggars saw him with the stick in his hand, they certainly answered everything without concealing anything. By the time they reached Yuezhou, Yang Kang had gathered about 60, 70% of the Beggar Clan's inside story. The only thing he did not know was classified information within the clan; since when he asked, the two beggars would not answer. He thought the Beggar Clan was a huge organization, and the Clan Leader held the greatest power and authority. In any case Hong Qigong's death was unverifiable, so he decided to seize the opportunity to become the Clan Leader, and then he would have authority over millions of brethrens. He had calculated it carefully and could not find any flaw in his plan, thereupon he arranged a set of lies and went as far as telling the great assembly the fake news about Hong Qigong's death and his self appointment as the next Clan Leader.

He was able to talk with a straight face in the midst of several hundreds of bold and outstanding warriors of the Beggar Clan; his face did not show the slightest bit of blushing, his words flowed freely. He knew perfectly well that if his lie was exposed, the group of beggar would turn him into mincemeat on the spot; but he thought if he wanted to achieve an important matter he surely would have to brave the risk. Much less Hong Qigong had died and the bamboo stick was in his hand, Guo Jing and Huang Rong were captured, so there was no immediate danger for him. Once he becomes the Clan Leader he will gain endless advantages; these millions of beggars would pave his way to reach the 'unlimited riches and honor' he so desired.

The Clean Clothes Faction's Jian, Peng and Liang, three Elders were pleased to hear Yang Kang's speech. Actually the Beggar Clan was divided into the Clean and Dirty Clothes Factions. Other than wearing clothes full of patches, the Clean Clothes members led an ordinary life just like common people. These people were originally Jianghu's warriors who either admired the Beggar Clan's chivalrous deeds that they joined the Clan, or was in good term with a Beggar Clan disciple; they were by no means beggars. The Dirty Clothes Faction members actually begged for a living; they observed a strict commandment: they could not use money to buy things, they must not eat on the same table with outsiders, they must not fight with people who did not know martial art. Each faction held their own principles and the dispute between two factions continued.

Hong Qigong was a fair leader; he would wear clean clothes the first year, and dirty clothes the next; year after year he treated the Clean and Dirty Clothes Factions equally. Begging was the Dirty Clothes Faction's true color; but Hong Qigong loved to eat and drink, begging for spoiled soup and cold rice to alleviate his hunger proved too much

for him, therefore, he could not strictly observe the discipline of the Dirty Clothes Faction.

Among the four elders, Lu Youjiao was the one earned his esteem most. If not for Lu Youjiao's hot temper, which spoiled several important business of the Clan, Hong Qigong would early on assign him to be his successor as the Clan Leader. In this general assembly in Yuezhou the Clean Clothes Faction was worried because speaking about morality, martial art and popularity, Lu Youjiao had eight, nine out of ten chance of being the candidate for the next Clan Leader. Moreover, although the Clean Clothes Faction had three out of four elders, the Dirty Clothes Faction disciples held the majority within the Beggar Clan.

The three elders of the Clean Clothes Faction had pondered deeply on various ways to handle this matter, but remembering Hong Qigong's prestige nobody dared to act rashly. Afterwards they saw Yang Kang arrive at Yuezhou with the bamboo stick in his hand, and they also heard that Hong Qigong was dead. Although they were genuinely grieved, they also saw this as a good opportunity to gain power over the Dirty Clothes Faction. That was the reason they agreed to support Yang Kang.

Actually fully respectful yet cautious they had attempted to scout Qigong's order earlier; but Yang Kang was sly, he was afraid they might have a change of heart, so he was not willing to divulge anything until he announced it at the general assembly. The three elders of the Clean Clothes Faction knew they did not have any chance of becoming a clan leader, yet they were not disappointed as long as Lu Youjia was not elected either. They were willing to support this decision wholeheartedly; they thought Yang Kang was young, it would not be difficult to influence him later. Moreover, his clothes were magnificent, his choice of cuisine exquisite, he would in no way show favoritism

toward the Dirty Clothes Faction. Thereupon three people looked at each other and nodded their heads.

Jian Zhanglao said, "The stick in this Yang Xianggong's [honorable master] hand is our Clan's sacred article. If there is anybody among the brothers who has some doubts, please come forward and inspect it carefully."

Lu Youjiao cast a sidelong glance toward Yang Kang, he thought, "Can I rely on this kid to be the Clan Leader, to unite and command the Beggar Clan's members under the heaven?" He held out his hand to receive the bamboo stick. He saw that the stick was dark green crystal clear; it was obviously the stick that was passed on by the Clan Leader from one generation to the next. He thought, "Hong Bangzhu must be indebted to him that he passed on this stick to this boy. The former Bangzhu has issued an order, how can my generation dare not to obey? I must work with complete dedication to support him, I must not fail the good foundation Hong Bangzhu has built." Thereupon he lifted the stick with both hands and respectfully returned it back to Yang Kang. With a loud and clear voice he said, "We comply with the Lao Bangzhu's [Old Clan Leader] last wish; we herewith revere Yang Xianggong as the Nineteenth Clan Leader of the Beggar Clan." The crowd cheered.

Guo Jing and Huang Rong could not move their bodies, they could not open their mouths, all they could do was bitterly groaning in their hearts. Guo Jing thought, "The Huang Daozhu's [Island Master] prediction was accurate, Yang Kang dares to become the Clan Leader. He will certainly create big disaster in the future."

Huang Rong thought, "This fellow will surely not release us. I wonder how he will punish us. We'll have to act accordingly."

She heard Yang Kang modestly say, "I am young and my knowledge is shallow, I'm without virtue and powerless. I do not deserve this heavy responsibility."

Peng Zhanglao said, "Hong Bangzhu had ordered it this way, Yang Xianggong does not need to be modest. The brethrens will support you with one mind. Yang Xianggong, please feel at ease."

"Exactly!" Lu Youjiao said. He coughed and produced thick phlegm, then spat it to Yang Kang's face.

Yang Kang had never anticipated this; he was caught unguarded, the phlegm landed on his right cheek. He was startled and was about to ask when Jian, Peng and Liang three Elders also spat on his body. "I am finished!" Yang Kang cried out secretly. He thought his plot had been exposed by the four elders, so he wanted to turn around and run away, but he knew it would be very difficult to escape so he just resigned to wait for his violent death. Unexpectedly the Four Elders cupped their fists in front of their chests to salute him. Yang Kang was confounded and dumbstruck.

The beggars, starting with the most senior, came to him one by one and spat at him, then they saluted him. Yang Kang was pleasantly surprised and secretly expressed his admiration, "So they are being respectful to me by spitting at me?"

He did not know that the Beggar Clan always followed their custom and tradition; they saluted their new clan leader by spitting at him. It was because the beggars all over the world received insult and disgrace from countless other people, so the new leader must first receive insult and disgrace from his own members. This custom actually carried a very profound meaning.

Huang Rong suddenly remembered on the Mingxia [bright red clouds] Island, after Hong Qigong passed on the Clan Leader position to her he also spat phlegm at her clothes. She thought it was because of his heavy injury at that time that his saliva did not reach too far. So she did not understand that spitting saliva was the way to inaugurate the new Clan Leader. She also remembered Hong Qigong say, "When the Beggars pay obeisance to you in future, there will be a disgusting ritual. Ah, this will be hard on you." Now she knew that her Shifu was afraid she did not like to be dirty and refuse the Clan Leader position, hence he concealed the truth and did not state what she would be facing clearly.

For most of the day the beggars performed their inaugurating ritual; after they were finished they shouted together, "Yang Bangzhu, please go up the Xuanyuan Platform!"

Yang Kang saw that platform was not too high; he wanted to show off his skill so his legs kicked the ground and he flew up the platform with a graceful movement. Although the way he leaped was excellent, the Four Elders were proficient in martial art so that they could see his skill was flashy but lacking substance, the foundation was still shallow. However, they realized that he was still young; it was obvious that to possess this kind of ability he must have received tutelage from a prominent master, which was also considered quite special.

From the Xuanyuan Platform Yang Kang spoke in loud and clear voice, "Although the killers of the Old Clean Leader have not been punished, but I managed to capture their two accomplices."

His words created an uproar within the group of beggars. They shouted, "Where? Where?" "Bring them here and



we'll chop them into pieces," "Don't kill them with a saber, let the dogs eat them slowly."

Guo Jing thought, "Who is this accomplice he captured? I want to take a look."

"Take them to the front of the platform!" Yang Kang said with a stern voice.

Peng Zhanglao flew toward Guo Jing and Huang Rong. He grabbed both of them, one on each hand, and brought them to the front of the platform and threw them to the ground. Only now did Guo Jing realized, "Bastard! So he meant us," he silently cursed.

As Lu Youjiao saw Jing and Rong two people, he was stunned, busily he said, "Reporting to Bangzhu: these two are the Lao Bangzhu's disciples; how can they injure their own master?"

Yang Kang hatefully said, "Exactly because of this we are angrier than ever. These two deceitfully killed their own master, they are guilty of the most heinous crime."

Peng Zhanglao said, "Yang Bangzhu witnessed it with his own eyes; how can that be wrong?"

Among the group of beggars, Li Sheng and Yu Zhaoxing were at Baoying trying to save Cheng Yaojia. They nearly lost their lives under Ouyang Ke's hand, fortunately Guo Jing and Huang Rong came to their rescue. They both felt admiration toward this couple. Besides, they also knew Hong Qigong was very fond of these two disciples of his. Therefore, from among the beggars they rushed forward and Li Sheng called out, "Reporting to Bangzhu: these two are chivalrous heroes; subordinate is willing to vouch for them with my own life, Lao Bangzhu's death definitely has nothing to do with them."

Yu Zhaoxing called out, "These two are good people; they are very good friends of ours."

Liang Zhanglao stared at them and shouted, "If you have anything to say, let your Elder say it for you. Do you think this is the place where you can interrupt at will?"

Li and Yu two people belonged to the Dirty Clothes Faction, they were under Lu Youjiao's leadership. Since their rank was inferior, they did not dare to talk back to an elder. With anger in their hearts they stepped back into the crowd.

Lu Youjiao said, "It's not that subordinate did not believe Bangzhu, but the death and revenge of the Lao Bangzhu is a very important matter. I ask Bangzhu to examine this matter carefully so the truth will be revealed."

Yang Kang had anticipated this request and cooked up a plan, so he said, "All right, I will examine them carefully." Toward Jing and Rong two people he said, "You don't have to answer; if what I say is correct, just nod your head, if it is incorrect, shake your head. If you think you can lie to me, remember that the blade is ruthless." He waved his hand and Peng and Liang two Elders each unsheathed their weapons and place them on Guo Jing's and Huang Rong's backs. Peng Zhanglao's weapon was a sword and Liang Zhanglao's was a saber; both were very sharp.

Huang Rong was so angry that her face was deathly pale. She recalled how at the Ox Village Lu Guanying proposed to Cheng Yaojia by asking her to shake or nod her head. At that time she thought it was so silly; unexpectedly today she was humiliated by this traitor with similar method. She also remembered once she played this trick to Ouyang Ke, and now she was at the receiving end of this trick. In her anger she was still thinking about how to raise Lu Youjiao's suspicion by nodding or shaking her head; how to incite him

so that he wanted her to answer his question orally. Once she was able to talk, exposing Yang Kang's deceitful scheme would not be a difficult matter.

Yang Kang knew Guo Jing was naïve, it would be easier to manipulate him; he lifted him up and stood him aside, with a loud voice he asked, "This woman is Huang Yaoshi's daughter, isn't she?"

Guo Jing closed his eyes and did not respond. Liang Zhanglao nudged him on the back with his saber, he barked, "Yes or no? Nod or shake your head!"

Initially Guo Jing wanted to ignore Yang Kang, but then he thought, "Even if I can't say anything, right or wrong will be revealed in the end." Thereupon he nodded his head.

The crowd believed Huang Yaoshi was the ring-leader of the criminals who killed Hong Qigong; seeing him nod his head they loudly called, "What else to ask? Kill him! Kill him!" "Just kill the little bastard! We'll deal with the old bastard later!"

Yang Kang called out, "Brothers! Be quiet, please! Let me ask him again." Listening to their Clan Leader's order, the crowd quieted down immediately. Then Yang Kang asked Guo Jing again, "Huang Yaoshi has betrothed his daughter to you, has he not?" Guo Jing thought it was a fact, so he nodded again.

Yang Kang bent his waist to grope Guo Jing's body and took a dagger with beautiful crystal-like hilt; he asked, "This is a gift from the Quanzhen Seven Masters' Qiu Chuji. That Qiu Laodao [old Taoist Qiu] carved your name on the dagger, is that true?" Guo Jing nodded.

Yang Kang continued his interrogation, "The Quanzhen Seven Masters' Ma Yu had taught you martial art, Wang

Chuyi had saved your life, you can't deny that, can you?" Guo Jing thought, "Why would I deny that?" So he nodded again.

Yang Kang said, "Hong Qigong, Hong Bangzhu, thought that you two are good people, therefore, he had taught both of you his unique skills; had he not?" Guo Jing nodded.

Yang Kang asked again, "When Hong Lao Bangzhu fell into enemy's ambush and suffered a heavy injury, you two were nearby, weren't you?" Guo Jing nodded again.

Huang Rong was anxious, "Sha Gege [Dumb Big Brother], no matter what he asks you always nod your head; you must make him to allow you to speak."

The crowd of beggars listened to Yang Kang's increasingly stern voice, and saw Guo Jing repeatedly nod his head and they believed Guo Jing was admitting all the charges. They had never realized that all these questions about Hong Qigong fell into ambush had nothing to do with the matter at hand; it was all part of Yang Kang's sinister plot to frame Guo Jing and Huang Rong. Even Lu Youjiao hated Guo Jing and Huang Rong to his bones; he stepped forward and kicked Guo Jing several times.

Yang Kang called out, "Brothers! These two little thieves have readily admitted their crimes, let's just spare them further suffering. Peng, Liang, two Elders, please proceed!"

Guo Jing and Huang Rong looked at each other mournfully. All of a sudden Huang Rong smiled, she thought, "In the end it is I who die with Jing Gege, not that Huazheng! It's better to die like this. There are heavy rains ahead anyway; it's no use to run away."

Guo Jing lifted up his eyes to the sky, he remembered his mother in the desert far away and looked toward the north.

He saw the Big Dipper constellation shining its brilliant light; suddenly his heart was moved. He recalled Quanzhen Seven Masters fight Mei Chaofeng and Huang Yaoshi using this battle formation. As someone who arrived at the point of death his thought was especially keen; he recalled the Big Dipper Formation's offense and defense, attack and retreat, take in and send out, open up and close in, he remembered everything very clear.

Peng and Liang two Elders were holding their saber and sword tight, and were about to act when Lu Youjiao suddenly rushed ahead toward Guo Jing and Huang Rong, and called out, "Hold on!" He took the cloth stuffing Guo Jing's mouth and asked, "How did Lao Bangzhu get killed? Tell me everything."

"You don't have to ask, I know everything," Yang Kang busily said. Yet Lu Youjiao said, "Bangzhu, the more we know the details the better. None of the thieves having any relation with this matter will get away!"

Yang Kang was secretly anxious; he thought as soon as the truth revealed his situation would change; but it was inconvenient for him to stop Lu Youjiao from investigating this matter himself, so beads of sweats appeared on Yang Kang's forehead. Who would have guessed that although the cloth from Guo Jing's mouth was removed, he still did not say anything; he was still staring at the northern sky, as if he was entranced.

Lu Youjiao asked him several times, but it seemed like Guo Jing did not hear anything. Actually Guo Jing's full attention was absorbed by studying the Big Dipper Formation that he was completely oblivious to everything else; how could he hear what Lu Youjiao had said?

Huang Rong and Yang Kang were both very astonished that Guo Jing unexpectedly did not want to take this good opportunity to clear up his name, only one was sad, the other joyful; their feeling was a world apart.

Yang Kang waved his hand and Peng and Liang lifted up their weapons. Suddenly they heard swishing noise, a violet spark swept through the lakefront. Peng and Liang two people were startled and turned their heads to look up and saw two blue flames streaked up to the sky. These flames were several 'li's away from Mount Jun, seemed like they were released from the middle of the lake.

Jian Zhanglao said, "Bangzhu, we have a guest."

Yang Kang was startled, "Who is it?" he asked.

"The Clan Leader of the Iron Palm Clan," Jian Zhanglao replied.

Yang Kang did not know the Iron Palm Clan's origin. "Iron Palm Clan?" he asked.

"The Iron Palm Clan is a big clan in the Sichuan and Hunan area," Jian Zhanglao explained, "Their clan leader is paying us a visit, we'd better receive them well. We can deal with these two thieves later."

"That's fine," Yang Kang said, "Jian Zhanglao, please welcome the guests."

Jian Zhanglao conveyed the order. 'Bang! Bang! Bang!' from the Mount Jun's island three red rockets were shot out. Not too long afterwards a boat came ashore. The beggars lit torches up and stood to welcome the guests. The Xuanyuan Platform was located at the peak of Mount Jun. It was quite a long way from the foot of the hill to the peak, so

that although the guests used their 'qing gong' [lightness kungfu], half a day had passed before they arrived.

Jing and Rong two people were taken into the crowd, guarded by Peng Zhanglao's disciples. Huang Rong tried to assess Guo Jing's condition; she saw he was expressionless, eyes looking at the sky, mumbling nonstop about who-knows-what. She was extremely shocked; she thought his mind must be confused because of the great injustice he received. She further thought that no matter who the guest was, there was always opportunity to be exploited.

While she was still thinking the guest had already arrived. Under the torch light she saw about a dozen men dressed in black escorting an old man walking toward the platform. This old man wore a short yellow robe, with a large leaf fan in his hand; who else but Qiu Qianren? Huang Rong was angry, but also amused and disappointed at the same time; this man certainly would not do her any good.

Jian Zhanglao stepped forward to welcome the guests, extending some Jianghu pleasantries. He was very respectful. Afterwards he introduced the guests to Yang Kang, he said, "This is 'tie zhang shui shang piao' [iron palm floating on the water] Qiu Lao Bangzhu [old clan leader Qiu]; his divine palm matchless, his prestige shakes the world. This is our newly elected Clan Leader, the young hero Yang Bangzhu. I am glad you two can be acquainted."

At the Cloud Village of Lake Tai Yang Kang had witnessed Qiu Qianren's trick being shamefully exposed; in his heart he looked at him condescendingly. He thought that it turned out that this swindler was a clan leader of some big organization. An idea came into his mind; he pretended he did not know the guest, and said with a smile, "Fortunate meeting, fortunate meeting!" Extending his hand he meant to shake Qiu Qianren's hand.

Both palms met, Yang Kang exerted all his strength into his palm, deliberately wanted to crush Qiu Qianren's palm, thinking, "Everybody believes you have an outstanding martial art skill, I want you to fall in my hand. This truly a heaven-sent opportunity that this old man is here today, so I can show my martial art prowess in front of this crowd of beggars." Who would have thought that as soon as he exerted his strength he felt scalding heat on his palm; as if he was grasping a red-burnt coal. Hastily he withdrew his hand, but the opponent just grabbed his hand firmly, so he felt like his hand was continuously burning. He could not restrain from crying out, "Aiyo!" His face was deathly pale, tears streaming from his eyes, his body doubled from pain, he almost fainted.

The Beggar Clan's four elders were startled; they rushed forward together to protect their clan leader. Jian Zhanglao was the chief among the Elders. He struck the steel staff in his hand to a rock. 'Clang!' sparks flew everywhere. "Qiu Lao Bangzhu!" he said angrily, "You've come from afar to be our guest. Our Yang Bangzhu is young; how can you test his skill like that?"

Qiu Qianren coldly said, "Nicely I shook his hand; it was your precious Bangzhu who tested the Old Man first. Yang Bangzhu deliberately wanted to crush my old bones." While his mouth was talking, his grip did not loosen up; while Yang Kang kept crying out, "Aiyo!" By the time he finished speaking, Yang Kang's voice weakened and he passed out.

Qiu Qianren loosened up his hand and waved it away; Yang Kang had already fainted, he tumbled down to the ground. Lu Youjiao hastily rushed forward to pick him up. Jian Zhanglao angrily said, "Qiu Lao Bangzhu, you ... you ... What's the purpose of this? Isn't this outrageous?"



"Humph," Qiu Qianren sneered; his left palm slapped Jian Zhanglao's face. Jian Zhanglao lifted up his steel staff to fend off. Very quickly Qiu Qianren changed his slap into slicing down to grab the head of the staff. As the edge of his palm touched the head of the staff, he pulled the staff inward before even grabbing it.

Jian Zhanglao's battle experience was vast; he was startled, but did not release the staff in his hand. Qiu Qianren indeed did not snatch his staff; quick like a wind his right palm swept away to the left. 'Clang!' it hit the middle of Jian Zhanglao's staff. Jian Zhanglao's palm was chaffed, blood flowed out and he could not hold his staff anymore; it was snatched by Qiu Qianren. Qiu Qianren swept the staff horizontally to parry Peng and Liang two Elders' saber and sword while his right elbow struck toward Lu Youjiao's face. Hence in a short period of time he compelled all four Elders of the Beggar Clan to step back.

The crowd of beggars watched with amazement. They unsheathed their weapons; they would fight the Iron Palm Clan as soon as their Clan Leader issued his command.

Qiu Qianren's left hand gripped the steel staff's head, his right hand held its tail; he let out a loud and long laugh and secretly sent his strength to both hands. With a shout he wanted to break the steel staff into two. He did not know that Jian Zhanglao's steel staff was made of a specially treated metal, it was very ductile; the staff did not break. It stubbornly resisted his arms' supernatural power. Qiu Qianren exerted more strength and the steel staff slowly curved into an arc.

The crowd of beggars was astonished and angry. Suddenly they saw Qiu Qianren swung his left arm back and immediately wield forward, hurling the arched steel staff flying to the sky, toward the mountain rock at the opposite

side. With a loud 'Clang!' the staff's head struck the rock; the noise reverberated for a long time.

As Qiu Qianren demonstrated his hands' power, the crowd of beggars was amazed and frightened. Huang Rong was even more astonished, she thought, "This old man is obviously a useless swindler; how can he become so fierce all of a sudden? Could it be that he colluded with Yang Kang and Jian Zhanglao to perform this trick? Perhaps there is some secret on that steel staff."

The moon had reached the middle of the sky, all around the torches adding up its brightness. Huang Rong looked clearly, it was really the Qiu Qianren she saw at the Cloud Village and the Ox Village. She turned her head toward Guo Jing. He was still looking up to the sky, mumbling intelligibly. Could it be that he was so scared and angry he turned insane? She was deeply concerned about Guo Jing, so she no longer watched Qiu Qianren's acrobatic play; her pair of beautiful eyes watched Guo Jing's expression closely.

Qiu Qianren said with a cold voice, "The Iron Palm Clan with your precious Beggar Clan is usually like the water of the river, does not mix with the water from the well. Upon hearing that your precious Clan is having a general assembly at Mount Jun I come to pay a visit with a good intention. Why did as soon as we met your precious clan's Bangzhu demonstrated his power?"

Jian Zhanglao was intimidated by Qiu Qianren's power and reputation, he was already scared; hearing the hostility in Qiu Qianren's voice he busily said, "Qiu Lao Bangzhu misunderstood. Lao Bangzhu's prestige has shaken the four corners of the world; we always admire you. Today we are very honored to have Lao Bangzhu shines your glorious light upon us."

Qiu Qianren looked up to the sky without saying anything; his demeanor was very arrogant and threatening. After a long while he said, "I heard Hong Lao Bangzhu passed away. We have one less great hero of this world. Pity! It is a pity! Your precious clan also elected this kind of new Bangzhu. Ay! Pity! It's a pity!"

By this time Yang Kang had regained his consciousness; he heard he was being ridiculed at his face, he was angry but did not dare to say anything. He felt his right hand was still burning hot; his five fingers were so swollen they looked like five Chinese yams. The Four Elders of the Beggar Clan did not know how to respond.

Qiu Qianren said, "My visit today is to ask an important favor from your precious Clan; in return, I am going to offer something to you."

"We don't dare," Jian Zhanglao replied, "But please Qiu Lao Bangzhu tell us."

Qiu Qianren said, "Recently some brothers from my clan received the Old Man's order to take care of some business. I don't know how they had provoked two friends from your precious Clan that they were beaten and suffered heavy injuries. My brothers' skills were unrefined, so there is nothing I can say; but if this matter is spread out within the Jianghu, the Iron Palm Clan will certainly lose our face. Old Man does not know the good from evil; I want to ask for some lessons from the two friends from your precious Clan."

From the start Yang Kang did not have the slightest bit of care toward the Beggar Clan; how could he dare to offend Qiu Qianren for the sake of two Beggar Clan disciples? Immediately he said, "Who has dared to cause trouble and fight with friends from the Iron Palm Clan without

authorization? Quickly come out and apologize to Qiu Lao Bangzhu.”

Ever since Hong Qigong became the Clan Leader of the Beggar Clan, they had never lost power and prestige within the Jianghu. Now as soon as Hong Qigong was dead, the new Clan Leader was this weak; as the crowd of beggars heard this order, they were filled with contempt and resentment. Li Sheng and Yu Zhaoxing came out several steps from among the crowd. With a clear voice Li Sheng said, “Reporting to Bangzhu: our Clan’s fourth commandment clearly states that every one of us must uphold justice and chivalry; helping others in suffering. The day before yesterday while we were on our way the two of us saw some friends from the Iron Palm Clan bullying common people, taking some women captive. We could not hold our patience; we stepped forward to stop them. We fought and in the end have injured the friends from the Iron Palm Clan.”

Yang Kang said, “No matter what you have to apologize to Qiu Lao Bangzhu.”

Li Sheng and Yu Zhaoxing looked at each other; they were furious. If they did not apologize, they were disobeying their Clan Leader’s order; if they apologized, this humiliation was difficult to bear. Li Zheng loudly called out, “Brothers, if Lao Bangzhu was still alive he would not allow us to throw this face away. Today Xiao Di [little brother, referring to himself] prefers to die rather than be disgraced!” With a smooth motion he pulled a short dagger from his leg and stabbed it into his own heart; he died immediately. Yu Zhaoxing pounced forward to snatch the short dagger, then he stabbed his own chest; he died on top of Li Zheng’s body.

The crowd of beggars saw these two would rather commit suicide than to be insulted; their hearts were tumultuous, but the Beggar Clan's regulation was extremely strict, without the Clan Leader's command, nobody dared to move.

Qiu Qianren smiled wryly, he said, "Let this matter be settled this way then. Now I want to give your precious Clan a gift." His left hand waved; a dozen or so men dressed in black behind him opened a chest they brought along. Each one held out a tray and respectfully presented the tray to Yang Kang. The trays glittered brightly, they were full of gold, silver, jewels and pearls. The crowds of beggars were astonished to see them suddenly present these jewels.

Qiu Qianren said, "Although the Iron Palm Clan has enough food to eat, we cannot afford to present you with any appropriate gift. This gift is from Zhao Wangye [Prince Zhao, lit. King Zhao] of the Great Jin who asked the Old Man to pass along to you."

Yang Kang was pleasantly surprised; he asked quickly, "Where is Zhao Wangye? I must see him."

Qiu Qianren replied, "Several months ago Zhao Wangye sent his people to deliver this gift along with his message for the Old Man to pass them along to your precious Clan."

Yang Kang uttered an 'Hmm', he thought, "It was before father even made a plan to go south. I wonder what he had in mind with these beggars."

He heard Qiu Qianren continued, "Zhao Wangye admires the heroes of your precious Clan; he asked the Old Man to come over personally and deliver this gift."

Yang Kang happily said, "How can we be worthy to receive Lao Bangzhu's precious effort?"

Qiu Qianren said with a smile, "Yang Bangzhu is young, but you are very broadminded; you far surpass Hong Bangzhu."

When he was still at Yanjing Yang Kang had not heard Wanyan Honglie mention anything about the Beggar Clan; he was anxious to hear his intention. "I wonder what does Zhao Wangye want with my Clan? Would Lao Bangzhu give us directions?" he asked.

"Giving you direction, that I cannot do," Qiu Qianren smiled, "Zhao Wangye told the Old Man, that the land of the north is barren and its people are poor, it is difficult to set your feet on ..."

Yang Kang caught fast, "So Zhao Wangye wants us to move to the south?"

Qiu Qianren laughed, "Yang Bangzhu is very smart, the Old Man is impressed. Zhao Wangye said: in Jiangnan the lakes are wide, the land is warm, the people rich; why don't the brothers from the Beggar Clan move to south? It far surpasses the cold northern land.

Yang Kang smiled, "Thank you for Zhao Wangye's and Lao Bangzhu's kind direction. I will certainly comply."

Qiu Qianren did not expect that the Beggar Clan would readily accept his proposal; his face showed doubt. He had not anticipated this response. His mind churning, he thought this man was young and weak; and when he had just squeezed his hand with Iron Palm, he fainted from the pain. It was obvious that this man was afraid of him; so it was not strange that no matter what he said this man did not dare to defy. However, the Beggar Clan had a deep root in the north, how could he easily agree to move to the south? When the Beggar Clan talked about it later, they were bound to regret this decision. Therefore, he decided to put the last nail on the coffin by saying, "A real man

cannot breach his own word. Today Yang Bangzhu gave your word; once the Beggar Clan brothers cross the great river, you will not return to the north, correct?"

Yang Kang was about to comply, but Lu Youjiao suddenly said, "Reporting to Bangzhu: we beg for a living, what use we have for gold and silver? Besides, our Clan has hundreds of thousands of members spreading all over the world, how can we limit their movements? I beg Bangzhu to reconsider."

By now Yang Kang had understood clearly Wanyan Honglie's intention. He knew that at the north of the river the Beggar Clan had always fought the Jins. Each time the Jins attacked to the south the Beggar Clan would disturb the rear of the army's movement; either by assassinating the high ranking military officers or burning their provisions down.

If the Beggar Clan moved to the south, naturally it would tremendously help the Jin's effort in attacking the south. Thereupon he said, "This is Qiu Lao Bangzhu's kind intention; if we refuse, we would be disrespectful to him. I don't want any of the gold and silver; four honorable Elders can divide it among the brethrens after the assembly is over."

Lu Youjiao anxiously said, "Our Hong Lao Bangzhu was widely known as the Northern Beggar. Everybody in the world knows that our base is in the north. How can we move so easily? Our Clan has vowed our loyalty and patriotism to serve our country, we have been enemies with the Jins forever. We surely cannot accept their gift; and most certainly we cannot move across the Changjiang."

Yang Kang was furious; he was about to reply when Peng Zhanglao said with a smile, "Lu Zhanglao, the important

matter in our Clan is decided by our Bangzhu; it is not decided by you, is it?"

Lu Youjiao imposingly said, "I would rather die than forgetting about loyalty and patriotism to my country."

"Jian, Peng, Liang Zhanglaos, what do you say" Yang Kang asked.

Jian and Liang Zhanglaos hesitated before answering; they also thought moving across the Changjiang was not an appropriate thing to do. But Peng Zhanglao with a loud voice replied, "We rely on Bangzhu's decision. How can subordinates dare to disobey?"

"Good," Yang Kang said, "We will move across the Dajiang [Great River] by the first of the eighth month."

As he said this, more than half of the crowd of beggars broke in clamor. Hearing this reaction Yang Kang was temporarily at a loss. Jian, Peng and Liang three Elders shouted their orders for the noise to stop, but most of those who were angered were from the Dirty Clothes Faction; they ignored these three Elders.

Peng Zhanglao shouted, "Lu Zhanglao, are you going to rebel against our Bangzhu?"

Lu Youjiao imposingly said, "Even if a thousand sabers chop my body to pieces, I will not dare to rebel against Bangzhu. But Lu Youjiao does not dare to abandon the wishes of our forefathers even more! The Jin kingdom is our Great Song's archenemy. What would Hong Lao Bangzhu say to us?"

Jian and Liang two Elders hung their heads without saying anything; they started to regret their indecisiveness.

Qiu Qianren saw the situation was not good; he was afraid it would be difficult to attain success if he does not deal with



Lu Youjiao. He coldly laughed and said to Yang Kang, "Yang Bangzhu, is this Lu Zhanglao always this bossy?" As his words come out, his palms ferociously struck out to grab Lu Youjiao's shoulder.

As soon as Qiu Qianren sneered, Lu Youjiao was ready to protect himself; he knew Qiu Qianren was fierce, he did not dare to parry. He bent his waist and slipped through under Qiu Qianren's crotch. Without straightening up his body, 'whoosh! whoosh! whoosh!' he already sent three kicks toward Qiu Qianren's buttocks. He was called Lu Youjiao [Lu with a foot/kick], it was because his leg skill was really good; the kicks were very swift and fierce.

Qiu Qianren thought this man's way of evading his attack by slipping underneath his crotch was very strange; and then he felt the gust of wind from behind, quickly his palm slapped backwards. If Lu Youjiao's third kick hit its target, it would certainly cause some damage; but if the kick was hit by the opponent's Iron Palm, his own shin could break. Hence Lu Youjiao pulled it back abruptly when it was still midway; he rolled sideways and suddenly spat thick phlegm toward Qiu Qianren's face. Qiu Qianren leaned his head sideways to evade; he was startled by the opponent's strange move.

"Lu Zhanglao, don't be rude to the honored guest!" Yang Kang shouted.

Lu Youjiao immediately went back two steps as soon as he heard his Clan Leader's order. But Qiu Qianren actually showed no mercy whatsoever; his hands went straight toward Lu Youjiao's throat like a pair of pliers. Lu Youjiao was startled; he turned around to evade, but heard the enemy shout 'hey' and both of his hands were grabbed.

Lu Youjiao had fought hundreds of battles; he stayed calm in face of defeat. With all his might he raised his hands but failed to lift the enemy, he immediately struck the enemy's stomach using his head. Since he was little, Lu Youjiao had trained his head in 'tong chui tie tou' [copper hammer iron head]; with his head he was able to make a hole in the wall. Many times he made a bet with his fellow beggars to strike his head against a bullock's. Each time the two heads collided, his head was not injured, but the bullock actually passed out.

This time he understood that he might not be able to injure the enemy, but he hoped he could get his hands freed up from the enemy's grasp. Who would have thought that as the top of his head touched the enemy's stomach he felt he was hitting a soft object; as if he was entering a soft cotton pillow. He knew it was not a good sign; so he hastily withdrew his head, but to his surprise the enemy's stomach also followed his head. Lu Youjiao struggled with all his strength, yet Qiu Qianren's stomach had a very strong suction, holding Lu Youjiao's head firmly. Lu Youjiao was frightened since he felt his head was gradually burning hot; at the same time he felt as if his hands were also entering a hot furnace. The pain was unbearable.

"Do you surrender?" Qiu Qianren shouted.

"Stinky old thief," Lu Youjiao cursed, "Why would I surrender to you?"

Qiu Qianren exerted more strength to his left hand. 'Crack! Crack!' he broke Lu Youjiao's right hand fingers. "Do you surrender?" Qiu Qianren asked again.

"Stinky old thief," Lu Youjiao cursed, "Why would I surrender to you?"

‘Crack! Crack!’ Lu Youjiao’s left hand fingers were broken. He was in so much pain that his mind was in a daze, but his mouth kept shouting curses.

Qiu Qianren said, “If I add more strength to my stomach, your head will be crushed. I want to see if you can keep cursing.”

He had not finished speaking when suddenly someone leaped out from among the crowd of beggars; he was tall and broad-shouldered, it was none other than Guo Jing. He was walking in big strides toward Lu Youjiao’s back. He lifted his right palm high, ‘slap, slap, slap!’ he slapped Lu Youjiao’s buttocks three times so hard that the sound was heard loud and clear.

Although these three slaps hit Lu Youjiao’s buttocks, Qiu Qianren felt strong bursts of energy flowing from Lu Youjiao’s head toward his stomach. ‘Bang! Bang! Bang!’ the energy melted the suction force of his own stomach.

Lu Youjiao felt his head was free, he hastily withdrew, trying to stand up; but his hands were still firmly gripped by the enemy. Guo Jing called out, “You are not Qiu Lao Qianbei’s [old senior Qiu] match; get out of the way!” His left leg swept away, kicking Lu Youjiao’s left shoulder.

This kick of his looked ordinary, yet although it landed on Lu Youjiao’s body, the force was actually transmitted to Qiu Qianren’s arms. Qiu Qianren felt his palms were shaken and involuntarily loosened his grip. Lu Youjiao took advantage of this good opportunity; he borrowed the strength from Guo Jing’s kick and threw himself aside. Only his head was captured for quite a long time and he felt dizzy; he was not able to stand steadily and tumbled down on the ground.

Qiu Qianren was startled to see Guo Jing’s three slaps and one kick; he thought this man was young, but unexpectedly

possessed this kind of transferring force skill. He did not think that there was somebody like this among the Beggar Clan. He immediately put his guard up and did not dare to attack rashly.

The crowd of beggars was not clear on what was going on; they still believed Guo Jing was an accomplice of the enemies who killed their Clan Leader, and then they saw Guo Jing kick Lu Youjiao. They shouted angrily and pressed forward to surround him.

Earlier Guo Jing was bound tightly by the braided steel wire and cowhide rope; he could not move even the slightest bit. His eyes kept looking up to the Big Dipper constellation. He recalled the Quanzhen Seven Masters' movements he saw at the Ox Village and compared it to the Nine Yin Manual he memorized so well, which was difficult to understand. He pondered it in his heart, and one by one those passages became clear to him.

The Nine Yin Manual was the result of a highly-skilled senior's comprehension of the Taoist Canon; it was closely interlinked with the Quanzhen Sect's internal energy cultivation technique Ma Yu had passed on to him and with the Quanzhen Seven Masters' Big Dipper Formation. It was just that the technique was profoundly deep and Guo Jing's comprehension was rather shallow so even after several months he still had not understood the correlation. This time, looking at the Big Dipper constellation he vaguely saw the link between what he memorized and what he saw.

When Qiu Qianren talked with Yang Kang, Jian Zhanglao, Lu Youjiao and the others, Guo Jing was deeply engrossed in deciphering the 'shou jin suo gu fa' [collecting muscles shrinking the bones]. It was the most advanced technique in the Manual; similar to the ability of a mouse to go through small holes. When it was trained to perfection the

practitioner would be able to shrink his whole body to minimum, just like a hedgehog would curl up when facing an enemy.

On the Mingxia [bright red clouds] Island Guo Jing followed Hong Qigong's instruction to train the 'yi jin duan gu pian' [changing muscle forging bones technique]. By this time he had mastered a little bit of this technique, and it served as an excellent foundation for him. So it happened that when he started practicing according to the Manual the ropes that bound his hands and his feet were loosened. His skill was so good that it was ten times better than his brain power; although the ropes were loosened he still did not know how it happened.

Peng Zhanglao was on guard by Guo Jing's side; when he suddenly saw Guo Jing escape, he was very shocked. He tried to grab him, but failed; he looked down and saw the empty ropes lying on the ground. The ropes were still tied in knots, but the man inside had already slipped out just like a slippery loach. He was about to pursue when he saw Guo Jing was helping Lu Youjiao. Peng Zhanglao thought that even if he boldly step forward, he may not necessarily be able to subdue Guo Jing. Thereupon his mouth shouted loudly, "Capture this little thief!" yet his feet did not move.

Guo Jing had been bound for a long time, he was really angry. Moreover, he thought about Huang Rong's feelings; she was still somewhat childish, so she must be very angry. He knew that this crowd of beggars was swindled by Yang Kang and did not really have any enmity with Huang Rong and him, but right now seeing the crowd of beggars shouting and rushing forward to attack, he thought, "If I can't beat you well today, Rong'er's anger won't disappear easily!"

He wanted to use the Big Dipper Formation he had just thought through; his arms lifted up, his feet stepped on to the 'tian quan' [sky authority/power] position. But seeing that about six, seven beggars were pouncing him from behind, Guo Jing stood upright with a mountain strong stance, his left hand in horizontal position in front of his chest.

The first three beggars arrived, they held out their hands to grab his arm. Guo Jing stayed motionless; in a short moment several more beggars arrived. Guo Jing dropped his arm and with a floating motion he made a circle, attacking these several beggars' backs with his hands and feet. Some were hit on their backs, some on their waists, and some others were hit on their buttocks. A succession of cries were heard, "Aiyo!" "Aiyo!" "Thief male servant bird!" six, seven people fell on the ground.

Guo Jing was pleased, "This technique really works," he thought. He turned around, wanting to grab Yang Kang to settle the debt with him; but then under the moonlight he saw that two beggars were about to attack Huang Rong. He was afraid they might injure her, while he was too far to help and he did not carry any secret projectiles with him. In desperation he stooped down to take his cloth shoes off and threw them toward the attackers. He was not a quick thinker that he would invent this trick all by himself; he had heard stories from his masters, the Six Freaks of Jiangnan, how during the fight at the Fahua Temple his Second Master Zhu Cong took off his shoe and threw it toward Qiu Chuji. Therefore, he simply copied the trick.

Those two beggars were afraid that Huang Rong possessed the same ability as Guo Jing; able to free herself from the ropes. They approached her with caution, unsheathed the sabers in their hands, intending to kill her to avenge their Lao Bangzhu. Unexpectedly just when they arrived in front

of Huang Rong, before they even lifted their weapons, they heard a strong gust of wind on their backs; something was flying toward them, apparently an enemy was attacking them. The one with higher martial art quickly turned around and Guo Jing's shoe hit him on the chest. The other one was slower, the shoe hit his back.

Although the cloth shoes were soft and light, because of Guo Jing's internal strength the force carried by those shoes was not a small matter; the two beggars were unable to stand, one fell backward face up to the sky, the other dove face down to the ground. Peng Zhanglao was standing nearby; he was scared to see how with a pair of cloth shoes Guo Jing was able to hit people swiftly and fiercely. He hastily withdrew several steps back.

Guo Jing swept his hand to push back three beggars; he anxiously went to Huang Rong. He stooped down to untie the ropes, but he only managed to untie one rope before he was surrounded by the crowd of beggars again. Guo Jing simply sat on the ground, copying how Qiu Chuji, Wang Chuyi and the others battled the enemy using the Big Dipper Formation. His right palm blocked the enemies, he put Huang Rong on his knees and using his left hand he slowly untied the knots. He had mastered Zhou Botong's skill of 'shuang shou hu bo' [Mutual Hands Combat]; one hand two techniques. This time he used his left hand to untie the knots, his right hand to fend off the enemies' attacks; he did it so casually, without the slightest degree of rush.

In less than the time needed to drink tea, Jing and Rong two people were thickly surrounded by hundreds of beggars. Without looking back Guo Jing simply blocked the attacks from his back. All along Guo Jing took a defensive stand and had never launched any deathly attacks. It was only after he untied all ropes from Huang Rong's hands and feet did Guo

Jing took the cloth from her mouth and said, "Rong'er, are you injured?"

Huang Rong leaned on his knees; without standing up she replied, "No injuries, just numb all over my body."

"Good," Guo Jing said, "Just lie down to rest for a while; let me vent your anger for you."

Two people, one sat on the ground one of them laid down, were talking amiably as if they were not disturbed by the clamoring noise of the weapons and commotion of the beggars around them. Huang Rong laughed and said, "You may fight them, just don't injure my disciples and grand disciples."

"I'll remember that," Guo Jing said. His left palm lightly stroke her beautiful hair, his right palm suddenly shot out; 'Bang! Bang! Bang!' three beggars flew out above the crowd's heads.

The crowd of beggars was thrown into confusion. Four more beggars were flung away by Guo Jing's palm strength. Then from among the crowd someone was calling out, "Brothers, step back! Let the eight-bag disciples deal with these two little thieves." It was Jian Zhanglao's voice.

As the crowd heard his command they dispersed immediately until only three people left nearby Guo Jing and Huang Rong, and then five more people came from behind; this brought the total to eight people surrounding them all around. There were eight sacks on each of these people's back; their rank in the Beggar Clan was only second to the four elders. Each one of them was in command of a group of beggars. Two fat and skinny beggars who met and escorted Yang Kang earlier were also among them. There were originally nine eight-bag disciples, but Li Sheng killed himself so only eight were left.



Guo Jing was aware that although the number of the enemies has decreased, each one of them was a highly skilled pugilist. He was about to stand up when with a low voice Huang Rong said, "Keep sitting down; you can fight them. Just don't look them in the eye."

Guo Jing thought, "If the eight of them fight together, they will be difficult to block; I must overthrow some of them first." Recognizing the two beggars, fat and skinny, who met Yang Kang at the Ox Village his left hand snatched the rope he untied from Huang Rong's body; then with a 'duan jing pan ta' [breaking shins coiling strike] the rope swept like a whip. It was from the 'jin long bian fa' [golden dragon whip technique] he learned from Ma Wang Shen [horse god, lit. divine horse king] Han Baoju. The move was the same, but his internal energy had advanced tremendously, so the power carried by the whip was also increased.

The fat and skinny beggars saw the steel rope come sweeping, they quickly leaped away to evade. Guo Jing turned the steel rope into a wall, blocking their front, left and rear sides, leaving the right side open. The fat and skinny beggars were actually on this right side, while the other six beggars were blocked by the rope wall, so they could not attack. The two beggars saw the opportunity and pounced forward immediately, only to hear Jian Zhanlao anxiously call out, "Don't attack!" But it was too late; Guo Jing's palm moved like the wind, 'Slap! Slap!' he struck the two beggars' shoulders. The two beggars flew out toward the group of black-dressed Iron Palm Clan's men.

Although these two beggars were struck by the same force, since one was fat and the other skinny, the effect was not the same; the fat one fell near, while the skinny one flew out further. 'Bang! Bang!' they knocked down two men in black.

Originally Qiu Qianren only stood on the side watching the fight, he also thought little of the two beggars flying away; but as he heard the sound of the collision he was startled. "If they didn't die, our men must be injured." He rushed forward but saw the fat and skinny beggars leap to stand up, without suffering any injuries. The Iron Palm Clan men on the other hand, suffered broken bones; they crawled on the ground. Qiu Qianren was angry; he was about to turn around when suddenly he heard a strong wind on his back, two other eight-bag Beggar Clan disciples were flung by Guo Jing's palm strength.

Qiu Qianren knew that Guo Jing transmitted his energy in such a way that it was heavy in a distant and light nearby; the Beggar Clan disciples only suffer light force, while the ones they bumped actually bear the brunt of the energy. Immediately he pushed and redirected one beggar to an empty space, and then with a grunt both of his palms struck toward the other beggar's back. This time he was using his life-long cultivated Iron Palm energy. If his strength exceeded Guo Jing's, then not only he could counteract the incoming force, but he could also inflict heavy injury to the beggar; otherwise, even if he would not suffer injury, he would certainly be knocked down backwards.

The Beggar Clan's Four Elders and Huang Rong knew that in this pair of palms Qiu Qianren was staking it all to compete head-to-head against Guo Jing; the stake between victory and defeat was not small. They were watching with rapt attention. But as the palms thrust out, the eight-bag disciple flew another 'zhang', and then lightly landed on the ground. He was at a loss for a moment before turning around and went back to face Guo Jing. Surprisingly he did not suffer any injury at all.

In one hand the Four Elders of the Beggar Clan found out that Guo Jing's martial art was about the same level with

Qiu Qianren's; perhaps Guo Jing was somewhat inferior, but the difference was not too much. They were astonished and scared. On the other hand Huang Rong was even more surprised, she thought, "This Old Swindler's martial art is just ordinary, how can he block Jing Gege's palm strength? He was obviously using real power, not some crafty trick. He is really difficult to predict."

With this one move Qiu Qianren had tested Guo Jing's true skill. In term of internal energy cultivation he was still superior to Guo Jing by half a notch; but it was difficult to say whether this kid was a friend or a foe of the Beggar Clan. Qiu Qianren was in a dangerous place. It was not worthwhile to continue fighting; hence he waved his right hand and took the Iron Palm Clan people to leave that place.

The martial art of the eight-bag disciples of the Beggar Clan was more or less at the same level with Yin Zhiping, Yang Kang and their peers. Guo Jing had knocked down four people. Although one came back to join the fight, how could these five beggars resist to the power of Guo Jing's Eighteen Dragon Subduing Palms combined with mysterious variations of the Big Dipper Formation? If not due to the fact that Guo Jing looked up to his Shifu's face, these five beggars would have been already dead or heavily injured.

A dozen moves later he struck down two more beggars with his palm strength. The other three beggars did not dare to attack; they turned away to run. Guo Jing wielded the steel rope in his left hand and swept two beggars' ankles, pulling them near him.

"Tie them down!" Huang Rong said. Guo Jing took the steel rope and tied the hands and feet of these two beggars behind their backs.

Seeing him reaping a big victory Huang Rong was astonished and delighted. She wanted to capture that smiling face beggar, Peng Zhanglao, who held them prisoner earlier. She recalled her Shifu had once said that in Jianghu there was a method of influencing the mind, capable to make someone suddenly fall asleep so that that person could be manipulated, incapable of resisting. She believed this Peng Zhanglao had actually used this kind of hypnotics to them. "Jing Gege," she asked, "is there any 'she xin fa' [method to influence other people's mind, lit. intimidating heart/mind technique] in the Nine Yin Manual?"

"No ..." Guo Jing replied.

Huang Rong was quite disappointed, she whispered, "Guard against that smiling face beggar, don't look into his eyes."

Guo Jing nodded, "I want to beat this fellow to vent my anger!" he said, then he propped Huang Rong's body up and they stood up together. Guo Jing stared at Yang Kang and walked toward him in big strides.

Yang Kang had seen Guo Jing's impressive power when he fought the crowd of beggars, he was anxious and restless. He was hoping that the crowd of beggars would win by sheer numbers, but unexpectedly they retreated in defeat, now Guo Jing was coming towards him. How could he keep his life if Guo Jing got hold of him? In his fright he called out, "Four Elders, we have so many heroes and warriors over here, how can we let this mad little thief do as he will?" His mouth was shouting anxiously, his legs were not slow either; he quickly hid behind Jian Zhanglao.

Jian Zhanglao turned around and in a low voice said, "Bangzhu, don't worry; even if this thief's martial art is

higher, he won't overcome our number. We will use 'che lun zhan kun' [chariot wheels fighting as a bunch] to kill him." Raising his voice he called out, "Eight-bag disciples, spread out and form 'jian bi zhen' [strong wall formation]!"

One eight-bag disciple shouted their compliance and immediately led more than a dozen beggars to line up in two rows, their arms linked one to the other. Sixteen, seventeen people formed one strong wall. They shouted together and then lowering their heads they charged toward Guo Jing and Huang Rong.

"Aiyo!" Huang Rong yelled; lightning fast she leaped to the left. Guo Jing turned around to the right. But from the east and west two more rows of beggars came forward. Guo Jing saw the crowd of beggars' battle strategy was strange. He waited until these walls came near, but then he could not withdraw anymore; both of his palms struck forward to push the wall in front of him. Although his palms were strong, this wall consisted of more than a dozen men, plus their momentum in moving forward together was quite strong; how could Guo Jing push the wall away? As the center of the wall bore the brunt of the push, its two wings outflanked to the center. Guo Jing staggered, he almost fell down by the strong push of this wall. Hastily his left foot kicked the ground and he flew over the human wall. But before he landed he cried out in distress, for ahead of him another human wall came closing in. Quickly he regulated his breath, his right foot kicked and again he flew over the beggars' heads. Who would have thought that there are more walls ahead, seemingly inexhaustible. As Guo Jing just passed the front wall immediately the rear wall took its place; like a rolling wave, or a big wheel turning over. Even if Guo Jing's martial art were stronger he would eventually be overwhelmed by sheer numbers; in the end he felt like his movements were restricted.

Huang Rong was agile, her lightness kungfu was also better than Guo Jing's; but after a while more and more moving walls came closing in. She ran around to escape and gradually felt her heart throb and her breathing shorten. After flashing to the east and dodging to the west for a moment to her surprise she came close to Guo Jing, slowly they were pushed into a corner of the mountain peak.

Suddenly Huang Rong got an idea, "Jing Gege," she called out, "Retreat to the edge of the cliff."

Guo Jing heard her, he did not know her intention, but he pushed toward the edge of the cliff nonetheless. They were still about five, six feet away from the edge of the cliff, and unexpectedly the Beggar Clan walls stopped and did not charge forward. And then Guo Jing understood, "Ah, this is a deep canyon; unless they stop their steps, it would be strange if they won't fall down and die." He looked towards Huang Rong to praise her intelligence, but saw that her face showed anxiety. He turned his head and saw row after row of thick and wide human walls slowly step forward. They did not charge forward ferociously, but obviously they were going to push these two people slowly into the canyon below. There were hundreds of them in dozens of rows; it was simply impossible to jump over them.

When he was still at Mongolia, Guo Jing had been trained by Ma Yu to climb a steep cliff every night. The cliff of Mount Jun here was not as dangerous as the one in the Mongolian desert. Guo Jing assessed their situation by looking at the cliff wall and called out, "Rong'er, let me carry you on my back; we are going down."

"We can't," Huang Rong sighed, "They may throw rocks at us. This is a dead end."

Guo Jing was indecisive. Somehow, in the verge of life and death situation he suddenly remembered a section in the Nine Yin Manual; he said, "Rong'er, there is a section in the Manual about 'yi hun da fa' [altering soul great method], I believe it is similar with that 'she xin fa' you just mentioned ... All right, let's stake it all and fight; let us go down the canyon together."

Huang Rong sighed, "These are all Shifu's subordinates, they are his brothers; what good is it to kill so many people?"

Guo Jing suddenly stretched out his arms to lift her up, he said with a low voice, "Quickly run away!" He kissed her lightly on her cheeks, then exerting all his might he hurled her toward the Xuanyuan Platform.

Huang Rong felt like she was mounting the cloud and riding the mist, flying over the heads of several hundreds of people. She knew Guo Jing wanted to fight the crowd of beggars alone to give her a chance to escape. She bent her knees slightly and gently landed on the platform with a bitter sweet feeling in her heart. She saw that Yang Kang was standing on a corner of the platform; looking so complacent, flailing his hands and feet, shouting his commands over the combat. She did not want to miss this good opportunity, before she even stood firmly she pounced forward, her left hand grabbed the head of the green bamboo stick.

As he was watching the battle, Yang Kang was startled to suddenly see Huang Rong descend from the sky; hastily he lifted up the stick to strike her. Two of Huang Rong's right fingers swiftly moved toward his eyes, while at the same time her left foot turned around, and she snatched the bamboo stick away.

Yang Kang's martial art was inferior to Huang Rong's to begin with; and now Huang Rong was using the 'ao kou duo zhang' [snatching stick from a mastiff (dog)'s mouth] from the Dog Beating Stick Technique Hong Qigong had passed on to her. It was specifically created to take back the stick if it ever fell into an enemy with high martial art skill. Apparently this stance was several folds better than Yang Kang's skill, so he had no chance in keeping the stick in his hand.

Huang Rong's snatching the stick was real, while attacking the eyes was fake; but since her movement was so swift, her fingers unexpectedly poked Yang Kang's eyeballs. Yang Kang was in a lot of pain and he momentarily went blind. Yang Kang tried to guard his eyes and did not have any choice but let the stick go and then leap down the platform.

With both of her hands Huang Rong held the bamboo stick high over her head, with a clear and loud voice she called out, "Brothers of the Beggar Clan, please stop! Hong Bangzhu has not returned to heaven yet. Everything was made up by this traitor disciple."

As soon as the crowd of beggars heard her, they were completely taken aback; it was such an abrupt turn of eventa that it was hard to believe, but they were happy to hear the good news and mad to hear the bad news, a natural response to this kind of news. Everybody turned their heads and looked at the tall platform.

Huang Rong called out further, "Brothers, come over here, I want to tell you news about Hong Bangzhu."

Yang Kang's eyes were sore, but his ears could hear everything clearly; he also called out from below the platform, "I am the Bangzhu! Brothers, listen to my command: Quickly push the male thief over the cliff, and



then come back here to capture the nonsense-talking female thief.”

The Beggar Clan members always regarded their Clan Leader as a deity; even if there was a very important matter, they would not dare to disobey his command. Hearing Yang Kang’s command, they shouted and charged forward.

Huang Rong called out, “Everybody look clearly! Bangzhu’s Dog Beating Stick is in my hand; I am the Beggar Clan’s Bangzhu!”

The crowd of beggars was startled; they had never heard of the Bangzhu’s Dog Beating Stick being taken away by someone else. They hesitated and stopped their steps.

Huang Rong called out, “Our worldwide Beggar Clan is being bullied today, Li Sheng and Yu Zhaoxing two brothers are killed by others, Lu Zhanglao is seriously injured; all of that for what reason?”

The crowd of beggars was angered; more than half of them turned their heads to listen to her. Huang Rong continued, “It was because of this traitor surnamed Yang is conspiring with the Iron Palm Clan. They fabricated a rumor saying that Hong Lao Bangzhu is dead. Do you know who this man surnamed Yang really is?”

The crowd of beggars called out one after another, “Who is he? Tell us, quick! Tell us!” But some actually said, “Don’t listen to this female thief; she is creating a confusion.” Everybody talked at once, nobody knew which one was right, which one was wrong.

Huang Rong called out, “This man’s surname is not Yang, it is Wanyan. He is the son of Zhao Wangye of the Great Jin. He deliberately comes to destroy our Great Song.”

The crowd of beggars was startled, nobody believed what they heard. Huang Rong considered, "It is difficult to convince everybody at once; I'll have to use poison to fight poison. I'll place the blame on him." She put her hand into her pocket and groped around the contents one by one; finally she took out the iron palm Zhu Cong took from Qiu Qianren the other day. She lifted it up high above her head and called out, "I have just taken this thing from this surnamed Wanyan traitor's hand. Everybody please take a good look, what is this?"

The crowd of beggars was some distant away from the Xuanyuan Platform; they could not see clearly under the moonlight. Their curiosity was aroused and they approached the platform. Someone called out, "That is the Iron Palm Clan's Iron Palm token of authority; how could it be in his hand?"

Huang Rong loudly said, "That's right, he is the spy sent by the Iron Palm Clan, so naturally he carried this token. The Beggar Clan has upheld chivalry and justice in the north for several hundred years; how can this fellow surnamed Yang easily comply to move to Jiangnan?"

Underneath the platform Yang Kang listened with an ash grey complexion; his right hand raised, he shot two steel awls straight toward Huang Rong's chest. The distance was near and his hand was quick, so the two silver lights violently flew to their target. Huang Rong did not pay the slightest attention. Among the crowd of beggars there were about a dozen people shouted loudly, "Watch out the secret projectile! Be careful!" "Aiyo! Not good!" But the two steel awls struck the soft hedgehog armor and 'clank, clank' they fell to the platform.

Huang Rong called out, "Wanyan Kang, if you don't have any guilty conscience, why did you use secret projectiles to

harm me?"

The crowd of beggars unexpectedly did not harm her, they were astonished to the extreme; they talked to one another, "Who is right and who is wrong?" "So Hong Bangzhu has not died yet?" Everyone's face showed a frightened and confused look. They turned their eyes toward the Four Elders, expecting them to make a decision. The row after row of strong wall formations had been dispersed early on. From among the crowd Guo Jing walked towards the platform and nobody tried to stop him.

**End of Chapter 27.**

## Chapter 28 - Peak of the Iron Palm Mountain

Translated by Hugh (aka IcyFox)



*Elder Jian rapidly retreated to avoid being hit, but Huang Rong did not lose momentum and kept targeting his accupoints intensely. He started running, but the faster he ran, the faster the stick followed him. He had to continue jumping about until sweat was dripping down his white beard.*

At this time Lu You Jiao was having a debate with the other 3 elders. He said, "We have yet to learn the truth, so we should question them in more detail to determine the fate of our Clan Leader." The Clean-Faction 3rd Elder said, "We have already established our new Clan Leader, how can we change that at our whim? The rules established at the founding of our Clan states that we must never disobey the orders of our Clan Leader." The 4 Elders were having a heated argument. Lu You Jiao's fingers were broken and he bit his teeth to bear the pain but showed no sign of backing down. The Clean-Faction 3rd Elder made a hand sign and walked over to Yang Kang. Elder Peng said loudly, "We only trust Leader Yang. This evil girl helped cause the death of Leader Hong and cunningly escaped death, yet she's still here talking rubbish. Don't pay attention to her. Brothers, let's torture her till she confesses." Guo Jing jumped up and shouted, "Who dares touch her?" No one dared make a move on seeing his imposing figure. Qiu Qian Ren and his followers stood a distance away as they stood on the fence, taking delight in the Beggars' Clan's internal conflict. Huang Rong said clearly, "Leader Hong is now in the palace in Lin'an enjoying the Imperial Chef's food and is unable to reveal his identity. Hence he tasked me with the responsibility of this Clan's Leadership. When he's done savouring the food, he will naturally return." All the members of the Beggars' Clan knew about Hong Qi Gong's gluttony and felt there was much truth in her words, but

still could hardly believe that such a young lass could be their new Leader.

Huang Rong continued, "This thief of the Jin Kingdom conspired with the Iron Palm Sect to harm me and steal the Clan Leader's Dog-Beating Stick, yet you people don't attempt to shed light on the truth? Our 4 Elders are very experienced and knowledgeable, yet how was it possible for them to fail to see through such a simple ploy?" When they heard her, the clan members looked at their 4 Elders with doubt.

At this point Yang Kang could only stubbornly maintain his stand, saying, "You claim that Leader Hong is still alive, so why did he want you to be the Clan Leader? How do you prove your claim?" Huang Rong waved the bamboo stick, saying, "This is the Clan Leader's Dog-Beating Stick, isn't this proof enough?" Yang Kang laughed loudly, "Ha ha, this was originally mine and you snatched it away in front of everyone just moments ago. What 'proof' is this?" Huang Rong smiled, "If Leader Hong handed the Dog-Beating Stick to you, why didn't he teach you the Dog-Beating Skill too? If he did, how could I have snatched the Dog-Beating Stick from you?" When Yang Kang heard her mention the 'Dog-Beating Stick' 4 times, he felt that she made a blunder and he bellowed, "This is the token of authority of this Clan, what 'Dog-Beating Stick'? How dare you insult the treasure of this Clan?" He thought that his words could please the Beggars' Clan members but he was unaware that this stick was actually called the 'Dog-Beating Stick'. The 2 beggars with him deeply respected the Dog-Beating Stick and did not dare mention the name to him during their journey. Yang Kang had clearly showed his ignorance on the bamboo stick's name, and the Clan members all glared at him with displeasure. Yang Kang realized that he had said something wrong but could never have guessed that his mistake lay in

the fact that the immensely important bamboo stick did actually have such an uncouth name. Huang Rong smiled, "Treasure? Take it if you like." She held the stick out for him.

Yang Kang was delighted and wanted to take it but was afraid of Guo Jing. Elder Peng said, "Leader, we'll protect you. Take it first." Yang Kang jumped up with Elder Jian and Elder Liang. Lu You Jiao saw that Huang Rong was alone and jumped up too. He thought, "Though my fingers are broken, I still have my legs. My name Lu You Jiao (Lu Has Legs) is not for nothing."

Huang Rong gallantly handed the bamboo stick over to Yang Kang. He was wary of her and made sure his vital organs were protected before taking the stick. Huang Rong let go of the stick and laughed, "Are you holding it tightly yet?" Yang Kang said sharply, "What?" Huang Rong suddenly laid her left hand on the stick and shot her leg up. She tossed the stick down and said, "Once you've held it properly, I'll snatch it again." Elder Jian waved his sleeve and retrieved the stick. This move was clean and fast, and the beggars around cheered. Elder Jian then handed it back to Yang Kang. He gripped it and thought, "Unless you chop off my hand, you're not going to snatch it again."

Huang Rong laughed, "When Chief Hong handed this stick to you, didn't he teach you to hold it properly so that others wouldn't snatch it easily?" The crowd laughed as Elder Jian and Elder Liang moved in front of Yang Kang. Elder Jian's leg moved out as he tried to grab her but Huang Rong used a leaping technique from Hong Qi Gong's [Carefree Boxing]. She moved like a swallow, causing Elder Jian to grab thin air even though he was so close to her. His heart trembled slightly just as he heard the bamboo stick swishing towards their legs. The 2 Elders jumped away to avoid the strike. Huang Rong laughed, "Pardon me, but the

name of this stroke is [Rod Hitting 2 Dogs]!" Her white sleeve floated as she stood at the edge, the bright green bamboo stick glowing radiantly in her hand. This time she had moved even faster and no one could see what strokes she used. Guo Jing cheered, "Who did Chief Hong teach the [Dog-Beating Skill] now? Isn't this clear enough?" The beggars gathered around had seen her snatch the stick trice, each time faster than the previous, and they started debating among themselves. Lu You Jiao said clearly, "Brothers, this lady's strokes are indeed from our Chief's martial arts." The 3 Elders looked at each other. Knowing Hong Qigong for so many years, they knew that it was indeed from his martial arts. Elder Jian said, "Since she's our old Chief's disciple, it's natural that she knows some of his skills." Lu You Jiao said, "We also know that the [Dog-Beating Skill] is taught exclusively to our Clan Leaders only." Elder Jian laughed coldly, "That lass learnt some weapon-snatching skills, and though she's pretty good, how can it be proven that this is actually the [Dog-Beating Skill]?"

Lu You Jiao also had his doubts and said, "OK, young lady, please display the [Dog-Beating Skill] for all to see, and if it's really genuine, all the beggars will be convinced." Elder Jian said, "We've all heard about this skill, but none of us has actually seen it in action. How do we know if it's genuine?" Lu You Jiao asked, "What do you suggest?" Elder Jian clapped his hands and said loudly, "If this lady is able to defeat my [Pork Palms] with the [Dog-Beating Skill], I shall recognize her as our Chief. Should I have any 2nd thoughts, may my body be pierced with a thousand knives and arrows." Lu You Jiao protested, "Hey, you're a top expert in this Clan with your name known in Jiang Hu for 20 years now. How old is this lady? She's new to this skill, how can she be a match for your decades of experience?" As they were arguing, Elder Liang became impatient and jumped



towards Huang Rong, shouting, "The truth about the [Dog-Beating Skill] shall be known now! En garde!" His sabre chopped trice through the air, the cold light glinting on the blade. The chops were fast and fierce, yet they avoided her body with the accuracy of an expert. Huang Rong stuffed the bamboo stick in her belt and without moving her feet, she avoided the chops. She laughed, "With you, why do I need the [Dog-Beating Skill]?" Her left hand started her stroke while her right hand tried to snatch his sabre with brute force.

Elder Liang was a well-known figure, so he was furious that such a young inexperienced girl did not take him seriously. He immediately chopped towards her shoulder using his special move. Elder Jian no longer felt any enmity towards Huang Rong and instead thought that there was more to it then it met the eye, so on seeing Elder Liang's ferocity, he cautioned, "Elder Liang, don't apply lethal force!" Huang Rong laughed, "It's OK!" Her motion changed abruptly, punching and kicking, pushing and jabbing, changing between more than 10 different martial arts in rapid succession.

The beggars around glued their eyes to the action. An 8-Pocket skinny beggar shouted, "Ah! [Lotus Palms]!" The fat beggar then exclaimed, "Eh, she knows the [Bronze Hammer Boxing]!" Before he finished, she changed martial arts again, and the experts each exclaimed, "Ah it's the Chief's [Sky-Striking Skill]." "Hey, she's using the [Iron-Curtain Kicking Technique]!" "This move is [Limp Hands Overcoming the Enemy]!"

Hong Qi Gong was actually a lazy person who disliked taking martial disciples. It was only when the Beggars' Clan members made some important contribution that he would teach 1 or 2 strokes as a reward. Even when one of them performed his duties without regard for his life, Hong Qi

Gong only taught him one of the strokes of the [18 Dragon Subduing Palms] - the [Divine Dragon Displays its Tail]. Hong Qi Gong also had another habit where he would not teach the same stroke to more than 1 person, so whatever the Beggars' Clan members learnt would not share any common ground. It was only due to Huang Rong's intelligence and fantastic culinary skills that pleased him into teaching her dozens of different martial arts. But because she loved to play, she only learnt a few strokes each. Besides, Hong Qi Gong was too lazy to train her properly, so Huang Rong could only display the skills without the finesse. Still, her purpose was just to display the martial arts Hong Qi Gong taught her, and the beggars exclaimed when they saw that it was something they knew. Elder Liang's sabre skills were far better than Huang Rong's; it was due to her rapid change in martial arts that momentarily dazzled him, preventing him from attacking and forcing him to defend himself.

As the sabre flashed, Huang Rong suddenly withdrew her palms to her side and laughed, "Do you admit defeat?" Elder Liang had yet to use all his stances, why should he admit defeat? His sabre flipped outwards from his bosom. Huang Rong did not evade the strike, causing the beggars around to call out in surprise as the sabre flew towards her. Elder Jian and Lu You Jiao shouted for him to stop. Elder Liang also knew something was not right and hastily tried to pull the sabre upwards, but could not pull back in time and it hit her left shoulder. He groaned silently, "Oh no!" The force behind the strike was not very light and he felt that he must have injured her. Suddenly his arm went numb and the sabre hit the ground with a clang. Little did he know that Huang Rong was wearing the Soft Armour and that she seized the opportunity when he hesitated with his strike to tap his accupoint using her family's [Flower-Plucking Hands]. She stepped on the sabre and smiled,

"Well?" Elder Liang was so certain that he injured her in his strike that he was shocked by this sudden turn of events and wordlessly stepped away. Yang Kang said, "She's Huang Yao Shi's daughter, so there's nothing strange about her wearing the Soft Armour." Elder Jian creased his eyebrows in doubt. Huang Rong laughed, "You don't believe it?" Lu You Jiao observed that though her martial arts were good, she was still far behind Elder Liang. If not for her trick, she could only hope for a draw at best. Elder Jian was much better than Elder Liang and she was not his match, yet she was still giggling indifferently. Lu You Jiao was worried but the pain in his broken fingers was preventing him from speaking as he sweated profusely. Elder Jian lifted his head and said, "Miss, allow me to spar with you!" Guo Jing saw his imposing figure and solid steps and also knew Huang Rong was not his match, so he picked up the bundled cow skin and rushed forward. He tossed it out and wrapped it around Elder Jian's bronze staff (which Qiu Qian Ren lodged in the stone) and shouted, "Up!" The staff trembled and jerked upwards. The staff was facing Elder Jian but Guo Jing dashed in between and struck out with the [Six Dragon Palms] and hit it from the side. This was one of the strokes from the [18 Dragon Subduing Palms] and its force was something to be reckoned with. The impact caused the staff to change direction abruptly. Guo Jing caught hold of the staff and used it to execute the stroke [Clouds Without Rain] while his right hand executed the stroke [Convincing Sarcasm]. He applied the [Dual-Hand Skill] to execute 2 moves at the same time and the bronze staff rose up steadily. He then used the move [Sighting the Dragon in the Farm] and struck the middle of the staff. He shouted, "Watch it!" as it flew towards Elder Jian.

The staff flew like the snow and Elder Jian knew if he stretched out to intercept it, his hand would be dislocated,

so he jumped aside. He feared that it may hit the beggars around so he shouted, "Get away!" However Huang Rong stretched out the bamboo stick and tapped the middle of the bronze staff and gently pressed it downwards. This was a good example of the saying "4 liang moving a thousand jin". Though the move was gentle, it was one of the ingenious strokes of the [Dog-Beating Skill] called [Pressure on the Dog's Back] which made very efficient use of the applied forces. She pressed down on the staff and laughed, "You use the staff, I use the stick. Let's have some fun."

Elder Jian was stunned and gave up all thoughts of sparring. He bent down to pick up the staff and held it head-down, then bowed and said, "Miss, please show leniency." This action was actually supposed to be a mark of respect of a junior to an elder indicating inequality between their skills and the desire to seek pointers from the elder.

Huang Rong stretched out the bamboo stick and used the stroke [Facing the Dog to the Sky] and tossed the head of the staff upwards. She laughed, "Please dispense on ceremony. I may not be as skillful as you." This bronze staff had been Elder Jian's precious weapon for decades and yet he almost could not hold on to it firmly as it brushed his forehead as he hastily withdrew the weapon. He was surprised and quickly applied the stroke [Qin King Whips the Stone] and hit downwards from behind - a stroke originated from the martial arts of the heroes from Liang Mountain Slope (Liang Shan Po) called the [Mad Demon's Staff Skill]. Huang Rong saw that this strike was strong and fierce and felt that if he managed to sweep her down, she would still sustain internal injuries even with the Soft Armour. She increased her pace and used the [Dog-Beating Skill] and slid the stick up the bronze staff. The bronze staff weighed around 30 jin while the stick was only about 10

liang but the skill was profound and ingenious and easily allowed the bamboo stick to prevent the staff from breaking through within just a few strokes.

At first Elder Jian was only afraid that he would break the bamboo stick, so he restrained himself, withdrawing the staff once it made contact with the stick. However, with Huang Rong's proficiency in the stick, Elder Jian was repeatedly forced to defend himself. Within a few more moves, he only saw the shadows of the stick in all directions and had to use all his strength to hold his ground and could not care if he hit the stick forcefully or not.

Guo Jing sighed in admiration, "Master's martial arts are really unfathomable." He then thought, "I wonder where Master is now? I hope he has already recovered." He suddenly saw Huang Rong change tactics again. She held the stick with 3 fingers and it flew into a circular dance. Elder Jian was momentarily dazzled when he struck out towards her shoulder. Huang Rong flipped the stick to keep it close to the head of the staff, then she 'lured' the staff outwards, borrowing up to 90% of the staff's own momentum. Elder Jian felt as though the staff was about to fly out of his hands and he hastily tried to pull back but did not expect the stick to 'glue' to his staff. In his shock he changed moves 7 or 8 times in quick succession but found that he just could not 'shake off' the stick.

The [Dog-Beating Skill] has 8 main principles - Trip, Block, Trap, Poke, Pick, Lure, Steal and Turn. Huang Rong used the Trap technique to make the stick like a vine winding round a tree; no matter how the tree grows in width, the vine would not be separated from the tree. After more strokes, he tried to execute the [Massive Diamond Strength Staff Skill], causing the staff to produce a swishing sound but the stick still followed his staff around. Huang Rong hardly used any strength at all and simply used her stick to

chase his staff, so it looked like she was being controlled by the staff when in fact she was like a shadow using his own strength against him, just like how Guo Jing tamed his Little Red Horse years ago. Elder Jian no longer doubted her and was about to concede defeat when Elder Peng suddenly shouted, "Use the [Hand-Catching Technique] and grab the stick!" Huang Rong said, "OK, go ahead!" Her stick now changed to the Turn technique, which forced the opponent to follow himself, but causing the opponent to see a mass of flashes and shadows. He suddenly found that 5 of his vital accupoints on his back being threatened. Those were sensitive accupoints and a hit could be fatal. Elder Jian knew that the situation was critical and he rapidly retreated to avoid being hit but Huang Rong did not lose momentum and kept targeting his accupoints very intensely.

Elder Jian ran out of ideas and simply rushed forward. He managed to avoid the stick but it came up from behind. He stepped harder and started running, but the faster he ran, the faster the stick chased him. The beggars saw him jumping and running in circles around Huang Rong. She stood in the centre and made sure the stick did not leave his back by continuously changing hands to wield the stick; hence, she did not need to move around. Elder Jian's circles became larger and Lu You Jiao had to get down with the other two Elders to avoid being hit. Elder Jian hastily said, "Yes! Yes! Greetings to the Clan Leader!" He wanted to bow in respect but Huang Rong showed no sign of stopping, so he had to continue jumping around till the sweat was dripping down his white beard. Huang Rong laughed and used the Pick principle and tossed the bronze staff upward, borrowing much of Elder Jian's own jumping momentum. Elder Jian immediately bowed and cupped his hands in salute. The beggars around saw her brilliant performance with the [Dog-Beating Skill] and no longer had any doubts. So they loudly cheered, "Greetings to our Clan Leader!"

Elder Jian stepped forward to spit on Huang Rong's face, but when he looked at her jade white delicate face which shone like the blooming flower, how could he bear to spit on her? He hesitated and finally swallowed his spit back into his throat.

Just then, someone jumped up and caught hold of the bronze staff – it was Elder Peng. Huang Rong fell for his hypnotic trick before and utterly disliked him, so she looked at him in wary silence before lifting the stick to tap the accupoint on his chest using the Turn principle, which left him with no room for retreat. However, Elder Peng was very cunning, and as he knew his martial were below Elder Jian's he did not try to evade but simply cupped his hands and bowed.

After tapping his accupoint, Huang Rong angrily said, "What do you want?" Elder Peng said, "Allow me to pay my respect to Chief." Huang Rong starred at him and met his gaze, causing her heart to shudder and she hurriedly turned away. Still, she could not help but look at his eyes again. She turned back and saw his piercing gaze and this time, she could not turn away so she quickly shut her eyes. Elder Peng grinned "Chief, you're tired. Please take a rest!" His voice was silky and gentle. Huang Rong felt the fatigue rapidly overcoming her. When Elder Jian acknowledged Huang Rong as the Clan Leader, he felt that he had the responsibility to protect her, so when he saw Elder Jian using his hypnotic trick, he growled, "Elder Peng, what are you doing to chief?" Elder Peng smiled and said softly, "Chief needs rest; she's tired. Can you help her?" Huang Rong realized the danger but her body was dizzy and limp and she closed her eyes to fall into a deep sleep. In her semi-conscious state, she suddenly recalled something that Guo Jing mentioned and snapped out of her dream, exclaiming, "Brother Jing! Did you say the manual contains

some [Soul-Shifting Skill]?" Guo Jing had long noticed something wrong and would have killed Elder Peng in one palm strike if he tried any tricks; when he heard her, he jumped up and whispered something in her ear. Huang Rong heard him recite the passage, and with her high intelligence and good internal energy foundation, she was able to compose herself and force her eyes wide open, oblivious to the surroundings. Elder Peng saw her close eyes for some time and was secretly elated that his trick worked but he suddenly saw her re-open her eyes and smile at him. He smiled back but before he realized it, he felt his body floating and burst into laughter. Huang Rong knew that the skill in the [Nine - Yin Manual] was indeed superior and managed to hypnotize him with just one smile, so she chuckled. Elder Peng realized everything was wrong and tried to concentrate but instead lost further control of himself and stood up in wild laughter. The echoes of his laughing could be heard clearly all around the nearby lake.

The beggars around looked at each other and wondered what he was laughing at. Elder Jian kept shouting, "Elder Peng, What are you doing? How dare you show disrespect to the Chief?" Elder Peng pointed at his nose and bent his waist in laughter. Elder Jian thought it was something on his face and roughly brushed his hand across his face. Elder Peng laughed even more wildly and somersaulted down, rolling on the ground. The beggars realized something was not right. Two of his own aides tried to support him up but he shoved them away amidst his laughter. For this sort of hypnotizing technique, it required a substantial amount of internal energy and will power to control the other party. For an ordinary person, if subjected to such treatment, the person would simply fall asleep, but because Elder Peng was concentrating on controlling Huang Rong, the effect on him was ten times worse when she suddenly 'attacked' him while in such a state.



Elder Jian was worried that he would die from exhaustion, so he bowed to Huang Rong and said, "Chief, Elder Peng has been disrespectful, but I beg that Chief would be magnanimous and spare his life." Elder Liang and Lu You Jiao came forward and bowed too. Huang Rong asked Guo Jing, "Do you think it's enough?" Guo Jing replied, "OK, let him off." Huang Rong said, "Elders, if you want me to spare him, fine, but you folks must not spit on me." Elder Jian hurriedly said, "The clan rules are set by the Chief, and can be altered by the Chief, we will listen to you." Huang Rong was delighted to hear that she could avoid the spitting and laughed, "Ok, go tap his accupoint." Elder Jian jumped to Elder Peng and sealed two of his accupoints, causing him to stop laughing and he panted heavily. Huang Rong giggled, "Now I can rest! Hey, where's Yang Kang?" Guo Jing replied, "Gone!" Huang Rong jumped, asking, "How did that happen? Where did he go?" Guo Jing pointed at the lake and said, "He went off with that old man Qiu," Huang Rong saw the blur figures a distance away and did not pursue, knowing that Guo Jing let him off on account of their family ties.

When Yang Kang witnessed the match between Huang Rong and Elder Jian and saw her gain the advantage, he knew that if he did not leave now, his life would be at stake, so he slipped away to join the Iron Palm Sect while everyone was concentrating on the match. Qiu Qian Ren saw Huang Rong take the Clan Leadership and realized that with Guo Jing's and Huang Rong's good martial arts, coupled with the numerical strength of the Beggars' Clan, it was unwise for them to stay, so he led the Iron Palm Sect members and Yang Kang off the island by boat. Some of the beggars observed them leaving, but with the ongoing match, there was no one controlling the situation, so they ignored the party. Huang Rong held the stick up and said clearly, "Before Chief Hong returns, I shall preside over all

matters in this Clan. Elder Jian and Liang should lead some 8-Pocket members to welcome Chief Hong back; Elder Lu should remain here to recover from his injuries." The beggars all cheered.

Huang Rong then said, "How do you people propose we handle Elder Peng?" Elder Jian said, "Brother's offense is major and he deserves a serious punishment, but based on his merit for the Beggars' Clan, please spare him from death." Huang Rong laughed, "I knew you'd plead for him, Fine, he's already had enough laughing, so just demote him from Elder to an 8-Pocket member." The four Elders thanked her. Huang Rong said, "Brothers, you hardly meet and so must have much to say, you must give Li Sheng and Yu Tiao Xin a good burial. I see that Elder Lu is of good character, so all big matters will be decided by him. Elders Jian and Liang, please assist him. I shall take my leave now and we shall meet in Lin'an." She held Guo Jing's hand and left.

The beggars escorted them down the mountain and watched until their boat could no longer be seen before assembling again to discuss their plans.

The couple returned to the Yue Yang mansion by dawn and found the red horse and the two condors waiting for them. Huang Rong looked around and saw the red sun rising up from the lake; it was a beautiful scenery. She laughed, "Brother Jing, the essay by Master Fan Wen is really well written : 'The distant mountain swallows the river and is vast without boundaries. Day by day it stands majestically.' How can we not appreciate such a wonderful scene? Let's drink a few cups." Guo Jing agreed and they went upstairs. They thought of the previous night's events and laughed. They were drinking merrily when Huang Rong suddenly became angry and said, "Brother Jing, It's your fault!" Guo Jing was lost in confusion and begged, "Rong-er, please say

it." She said, "Ok, let me ask you, last night when we were both facing the Beggars' Clan formation you felt that your life was in danger, but why did you abandon me? If you had died could I still live? Don't you understand my heart?" Her tears fell into the cup. Guo Jing felt her deep feelings for him and was filled with love, grabbing her hand in his wordlessly. After some time, he said, "Yes, It was my fault. We should face death together." Huang Rong sighed and was about to reply when she heard someone on the stairs, when they saw each other, all three were surprised. It was Qiu Qian Ren.

Guo Jing quickly stood up and shielded Huang Rong as he was afraid of Qiu Qian Ren's murderous intent. However, Qiu Qian Ren merely laughed and went down. The laughter seemed to indicate surprise and panic. Huang Rong said, "He's scaring us. This is strange; I'll go check it out." She did not wait for Guo Jing's reply and ran downstairs. Guo Jing yelled, "Be careful!" He hurriedly dug out a piece of silver and plonked it on the counter before dashing out. He looked around but did not see them and remembered Qiu Qian Ren's vicious martial arts and underhand methods and was worried that Huang Rong might meet some mishap, so he shouted, "Rong-er, where are you?"

Huang Rong heard him but did not respond as she was closely tailing Qiu Qian Ren and knew that the slightest sound could betray her position. Huang Rong hid behind a wall and waited for Qiu Qian Ren to move further so that it would be safer for her to tail him. However, when he heard Guo Jing shouting, he knew she was behind and he too hid behind the wall on the other side. After some time, both of them heard nothing stirring and peered round the corner at the same time. They came face to face with each other and their expressions changed simultaneously.

The two people gasped and turned to walked away. Huang Rong was afraid of his palm strength but did not want to give up, so she went one big round, then used her Qinggong to dash behind the other corner of the wall. Qiu Qian Ren expected her to do that and he too made a circle then used his Qinggong to dash to the corner of the wall, but he went in the other direction and bumped into her again. Huang Rong thought, "If I turn around, he'd surely strike my back and I might not avoid it." She thought, "I should stall for time until Brother Jing comes." He laughed, "We met in Lin'an the other day and we meet here again. Miss, how are you?" She thought, "I clearly saw this scum last night yet he's still trying to fake it. I think I'll test him out with the [Dog-Beating Skill]. She shouted, "Brother Jing, strike his back!" Qiu Qian Ren turned and saw no one, he realized he was tricked and he heard swishing sound around his legs. He hurriedly jumped and managed to avoid being hit, but the [Dog-Beating Skill]'s Trip principle is continuous like the flowing river and would continue to target the opponent until it succeeds. Though the technique is only about tripping the opponent, it contains many variations. He jumped faster and faster, but he kept seeing the stick's shadow dancing around his legs. By the 17<sup>th</sup> step, he accidentally slackened his pace and immediately found himself slamming onto the ground. He yelled, "Wait! I've something to say." Huang Rong laughed and waited for him to get up before tripping him again. He fell another five times and did not attempt to get up again but instead remained motionless on the ground. Huang Rong laughed, "Stop faking death." He stood up and snapped his belt. Holding on to his pants, he said, "Are you leaving? I'm going to let go!" Huang Rong was shocked, as she never expected a reputable clan leader to use such a dirty trick. She feared that he would really let his pants drop so she turned to leave. She heard him laughing behind as he grabbed his

pants and chased her. The normally cunning Huang Rong somehow ran out of tricks and simply evaded him, finding it infuriating yet funny. He was about to catch up when he saw Guo Jing jumping out from the corner and shielding Huang Rong with his palms ready to strike. Qiu Qian Ren saw that this was a powerful stance so he laughed, "Ah! Oh no!" Huang Rong said, "Brother Jing, hit him." From what Guo Jing saw the previous night, he knew Qiu Qian Ren's martial arts level was comparable to Ouyang Feng, Huang Yao Shi and Zhou Bo Tong so he did not dare underestimate him. He concentrated his Qi in his Dan Tian to prepare for his enemy. Qiu Qian Ren still held on to his pants saying, "You dolls better listen to Master here - today I ate something bad and my stomach's upset." Huang Rong repeated, "Brother Jing, hit him." But she herself stepped backwards. Qiu Qian Ren said, "I know what you're up to. You won't be satisfied unless old Master here teaches you a lesson. But today, I've got trouble with my stomach. Fine; listen up, within 7 days, meet me at the foot of Iron Palm Mountain. Do you dare come?" Huang Rong heard him refer to himself as Master and held her bronze needles to throw at him for talking rubbish. Just as she was about to release the needles, she heard "foot of the Iron Palm Mountain" and remembered the 4 lines of words in the painting she saw at Qu Ling Feng's place. She said, "OK, we should come to take a look. When we meet then, we're not going to play with you. How do we get there?"

Qiu Qian Ren said, "From here, head west, pass through Chang De, Chun District, then proceed up Chao Yuan River. There will be a 5-peak mountain shaped like a palm. That's it. That's a dangerous place; if you're afraid, then apologize to me and don't come." Huang Rong became more excited and said, "OK, it's a promise. See you there." Qiu Qian Ren nodded before exclaiming, "Ah!" and rushed off clutching his waist.

Guo Jing said, "Rong-er, there's something I don't understand. Please explain." Huang Rong asked, "Yes?" Guo Jing said, "This old man's martial arts are good; we're not his match, but why does he try to fool us? That day at the Gui Yun mansion, he struck my chest. If he'd used his full strength, I'd be dead. What is he driving at?" Huang Rong nibbled her finger, saying, "I've got no idea. When I tripped him just now, he did not try to use his skill, maybe what he did with the bronze staff last night was a trick." Guo Jing shook his head, "He broke Lu You Jiao's hands - that can't be faked."

Huang Rong bent down and used her hairpin to draw on the ground. After a moment, she sighed, "I can't figure out what this old thief is up to. Anyway when we reach the 5-peak mountain, we could find out." Guo Jing asked, "Why should we go there? We should find Master. This old man is a trickster, yet you believe him?" Huang Rong said, "Brother Jing, the painting that father handed you was wet by the rain and some words were revealed; what were they?" Guo Jing shook his head. "The words were not complete, I can't infer anything meaningful." Huang Rong laughed "Really?" Guo Jing knew he could not have understood it on his own, so he quickly said, "Rong-er, you must know it, quick, tell me." Huang Rong wrote the lines of words and said, "The first line had the word 'Wu' missing, so it should be 'Wu Mu Yi Shu' (Yue Fei's War Strategies Manual '□□□□'). I couldn't have guessed the 2<sup>nd</sup> line if not for that old man, so it should be either 'Mountain' or 'Peak'." She recited the lines, "Wu Mu Yi She, Zhai Tie Zhang Shan (The manual's at the Iron Palm Mountain)." Guo Jing clapped and exclaimed, "Yes! Let's go! The Iron Palm Sect is corroborating with the Jin troops - they'd surely hand the manual to Wanyan Hong Lie. What's next?" Huang Rong laughed, "That old man said the mountain is shaped like a palm, and the 3<sup>rd</sup> line is 'Zhong Zhi Feng Xia'

(under the peak of the middle finger)." Guo Jing said excitedly, "Yes, Yes Rong-er, you're brilliant! The 4<sup>th</sup> line!" Huang Rong said, "I'm not sure. Di er...jie' (The 2<sup>nd</sup> ... )." She tossed her hair in the wind, saying. " I give up. We'll talk when we get there."

They rode towards the place described and reached it within a day. They asked around but everybody shook their heads. They were disappointed and put up at an inn. Huang Rong asked the waiter but he did not mention anything relevant. Huang Rong said, "This place is boring. Is there anything worth seeing?" The waiter could not resist and said, "There's this Monkey's Claw Mountain - the scenery is unparalleled." Huang Rong asked, "Where is that?" The waiter did not reply but instead said, "Never mind," and walked out.

Huang Rong chased him and pulled him back and placed a silver ingot on the table, saying, "Tell me more and this is yours." The waiter gently touched the ingot and said, "You are sure about this?" Huang Rong nodded with a smile. The waiter said in a low voice, "I'll talk, but you must not go. That place is reputed to be inhabited by beasts and demons. Whoever goes within 5 miles of the mountain can dream of coming back alive." The couple nodded. Huang Rong said, "The mountain has 5 peaks shaped like a monkey's hand, isn't it?" The waiter exclaimed, "Yes! So you already knew! I didn't say that. But there's something strange about the mountain." Guo Jing asked, "What?" He replied, "The mountain being shaped like a hand isn't really strange, what's strange is that every 'finger' on the mountain has 3 segments, just like our fingers." Huang Rong jumped up, shouting, "The 2<sup>nd</sup> segment, the 2<sup>nd</sup> segment!" Guo Jing yelled happily, "Correct! Precisely!" The waiter did not know what was going on and starred at the couple blankly.

Huang Rong asked for more details and handed him the silver. The waiter left happily.

Huang Rong stood up and said, "Brother Jing, Let's go." Guo Jing said, "It's less than 30km from here. We can use the Red Horse to rush there now, and we can pay them a visit tomorrow morning." Huang Rong laughed, "What visit? Steal the book." Guo Jing exclaimed, "Yes! I'm so dense, I didn't think of that." They did not want to arouse any attention so they left through the window and galloped southeast. The waist-length grass hindered their movement, but when they were 20km away, they saw the 5-peak mountain in the distance. Guo Jing excitedly said, "The mountain looks exactly like the painting, see the pine trees at the summit?" Huang Rong laughed, "We're short of a general up there. Brother Jing, go up and display your sword skills." Guo Jing laughed, "But I'm not a general." Huang Rong replied, "Isn't that easy? Eventually Genghis Khan..." Her words trailed off. Guo Jing knew what she meant and turned his head away, not daring to face her.

They left their horse at the foot of the mountain and utilized their Qinggong to scale the mountain. After many twists and turns, they came to a thick clump of pine trees. They stopped to discuss if they should continue upwards or investigate the clump of trees when they saw a faint light among the trees. They exchanged hand signs and crept stealthily towards the light. Suddenly, there was a whoosh and two black-clad armed men jumped up and blocked the road. Huang Rong thought, "If we fight them, it would be difficult to steal the book." She had an idea and took out Qiu Qian Ren's Iron Palm token and showed them wordlessly. When the two men saw it, they were shocked and quickly bowed and stepped aside. Huang Rong swiftly drew her bamboo stick and struck their accupoints then kicked them into the tall grass. She crept closer and saw a large stone



house with two boxes on the left and right of the entrance. In the center, a large urn was burning on a stove and the burning smell was easily detectable. Two young attendants stood on each side of the stove, one of them stirring the mixture inside with an iron ladle. From the sizzling sound, it was clear that the urn contained iron filings. An old man sat close by, breathing deeply – it was Qiu Qian Ren. After a while, he lifted his palms then stood up suddenly and struck his palms into the urn. Qiu Qian Ren practiced on the burning iron filings for a while then struck towards a cloth sack suspended above. The palm hit the sack with a solid slap, yet the sack did not even move.

Guo Jing was secretly shocked, thinking, “This cloth sack is not supported by anything, yet it didn’t move. His palm skill must be extremely good.” Huang Rong, however felt that it must be a trick; if she wanted to steal the book first, she would have said so earlier. He struck his palms into the urn then struck the cloth sack again, repeating this process several times. Huang Rong just could not figure out how he did this trick and thought, “If 2<sup>nd</sup> Master were here, he’d surely guess it. I’m not as smart as he is.” They peeped into the adjacent room and had another shock. Inside, a male and female seated together – it was Yang Kang and Mu Nian Ci. Both Guo Jing and Huang Rong wondered, “How did Sister Mu get here?” They heard Yang Kang’s sweet and flattering words and discovered that he was trying to trick her into marriage earlier. Mu Nian Ci, however, insisted that he kill Wanyan Hong Lie first before going into a relationship. Yang Kang said, “My dear, how could you be so short-sighted?” Mu Nian Ci queried curiously, “How so?” Yang Kang said, “Yes! Wanyan Hong Lie is surrounded by many bodyguards. Based on just myself alone, how could I succeed? If you marry me, I could pretend to take you to visit your in-laws. With the two of us, our chances are naturally better.” Mu Nian Ci felt that this made sense, so

she remained silent. Yang Kang saw that she was willing and so he held her hand and gently stroke it, then stretched his hand to hug her waist. Huang Rong could not take it and wanted to step forward and expose his plan when she heard an old rasping voice behind her, "Who dares trespass my mountain?" The couple turned around and saw Qiu Qian Ren's face glowing under the moonlight. Though he must have been playing a trick, his menacing gaze showed that he should not be trifled with. Huang Rong was startled, then thought, "He's on his own mountain now, of course he'd try to put on airs. Yup, he already discovered our presence earlier on, so he deliberately set this up for us, isn't it?" She laughed, "Old Qiu, we are here on your invitation. Have you forgotten the 7 -day appointment?" Qiu Qian Ren snapped, "What appointment? Rubbish!" Huang Rong laughed, "Hmm, how could you forget it so soon? Is your stomach upset gone yet? If not, you should consult a physician before exchanging blows with me, to prevent ... hehehe!" Qiu Qian Ren did not respond but launched both palms towards Huang Rong's shoulder fiercely. She giggled and ignored his strike, wanting to use her Soft Armour to pierce his palms. Just then Guo Jing exclaimed, "Get away!" She felt a gust of wind and knew Guo Jing tried to intercept him but felt a heavy blow smashing right into her. She fell backwards and everything went black.

Qiu Qian Ren felt a shock to his palms as they bled profusely. He was shocked and furious when he saw Guo Jing's palms flying to him, so he quickly retracted his palms and met Guo Jing's strike. Their palms met with a smack and both retreated three steps. Qiu Qian Ren stood firmly while Guo Jing stumbled, which clearly showed the difference between their palm strengths. The previous night when they exchanged blows, Guo Jing appeared to be on par only because he used the Big Dipper Formation. Guo Jing was concerned about Huang Rong, so he withdrew

from the battle and hugged her up to go, but he heard the wind gust from behind – he was being attacked again. Guo Jing struck his right hand backwards without turning around, using the move [Dragon Displays Its Tail] – this was a special move designed to save lives, and now when he was in great danger, the power of the move was increased. Qiu Qian Ren hit his palms and felt his body go slightly numb. He checked his hands and found the blood glistening in the moonlight and was afraid Huang Rong's protective vest could be poisoned. He looked closely and saw that the blood was still bright red, so he breathed a sigh of relief. Guo Jing took advantage of his procrastination to grab Huang Rong and dash out towards the summit. He only ran a few dozen steps when he heard angry shouts from behind. He turned and saw numerous black – clad men with torches swarming towards him. In the chaos he happened to discover that Huang Rong was not breathing. He screamed, "Rong-er! Rong-er!" There was no response. With this slight delay, Qiu Qian Ren's men came within a dangerous distance. Guo Jing thought, "If I were alone, I could break through this encirclement easily, but Rong-er is severely injured. I can't take this risk."

He ran faster and climbed directly upwards. He had learnt mountain-scaling skills before, so it was not long before he threw his pursuers far behind. Still, he did not stop, and when his face came into contact with Huang Rong's face, he felt the warmth of her cheeks and felt greatly relieved. However, she had yet to respond to him. He looked up and saw that the summit was quite narrow and could be easily surrounded, so he tried to find somewhere where he could save Huang Rong first. He thought he saw a cave in the darkness, so he dashed in that direction and found that it was really a cave, and its entrance had some stacks of jade stones. Guo Jing ignored any danger which may have lurked inside and rush in. He placed her down and put his hand on

her “Ling Tai” accupoint to aid her breathing. The Iron Palm Sect members could be heard shouting and yelling in the distance, but even if an army charged in row, he would still save her first. After some time, she coughed and regained consciousness, groaning feebly, “My chest hurts.” Guo Jing was delighted and exclaimed, “Rong-er, don’t be afraid, I’m here.” He walked to the entrance and looked down, and got a shock. The torches below formed a neat wall surrounding them and one prominent figure stood in the middle – it was Qiu Qian Ren. Yet for all the yelling and shouting, none of the people below moved any closer. He could not guess what they were up to, so he went back in to check on her when he suddenly heard footsteps in the darkness. Guo Jing was surprised and used his palm to guard his rear while he turned around, but he could not see who it was in the darkness. He called out, “Who’s that? Come out now.” The echo could be clearly heard in the cave, and after a slight pause, there was someone laughing, and he sounded just like Qiu Qian Ren. Guo Jing could make out a figure walking into the light – it was indeed Qiu Qian Ren. Guo Jing had clearly seen him down the mountain shouting and cursing, yet how could he get there in the blink of an eye? He felt the cold sweat trickling down his spine. Qiu Qian Ren laughed, “You 2 dolls aren’t afraid of death and came here to find your master, good.” He then said loudly, “This is the forbidden territory of the Iron Palm Sect, and all who trespasses it shall die, are you dolls tired of living?” Guo Jing could not guess his intention, but Huang Rong quietly said, “Since it’s forbidden, why are you here?” Qiu Qian Ren was taken aback and said, “I’ve got something important to do and I’ve got no time for your question.” He tried to leave the cave. Guo Jing saw his quick steps and feared that he would try to ambush him and harm Huang Rong, so he thought, “I should strike first.” Both his palms flew out toward Qiu Qian Ren’s shoulders and he expected Qiu Qian Ren to block him, so Guo Jing would then strike his waist.

This move was invented by the scholar Zhu Cong, with emphasis on masking the actual target so that the enemy could not block it. As expected, Qiu Qian Ren blocked him, but just as Guo Jing changed direction to hit him, Guo Jing felt that his opponent was not using any strength at all, totally unlike what he experienced just moments ago. Guo Jing did not think as fast as he moved, so he naturally grabbed his opponent's hands. Qiu Qian Ren struggled frantically but could not break free. But with this struggle, he allowed Guo Jing to see through his martial arts. Guo Jing knew there was no danger and released him. Qiu Qian Ren stumbled towards him, allowing him to simply seal his "Yin Du" accupoint. Qiu Qian Ren collapsed immobilized onto the ground and said, "Young master, this is a dangerous situation, how could you play games with me?" Now the yelling and chanting were getting much louder – the rest of the Iron Palm Sect members had rushed to the scene. Guo Jing said, "Bring us safely down the mountain." Qiu Qian Ren numbly shook his head saying, "My own life is in danger, how could I still help you?" Guo Jing said, "Ask your disciples to make way. When we reach the foot of the mountain, I'll release your accupoint." Qiu Qian Ren frowned, "Master, why torture me? Go to the entrance and see for yourself."

Guo Jing went to the entrance and looked down and was startled. Qiu Qian Ren stood in front of his disciples yelling away. Guo Jing quickly turned around and saw him lying down. He asked in a confused voice, "You...you...Why are there 2 of you?" Huang Rong said, "Silly boy, don't you see, there are 2 of them. One is highly skilled in martial arts while the other can only brag and boast. They look exactly alike and this is the big-mouthed one." Guo Jing was perplexed for a while before the truth dawned on him and he said, "Is that right?" Qiu Qian Ren made a sour face and said, "Since she said so, then it's so. We're twins and I'm the

elder. At first I was better in martial arts but my brother's improved drastically later." Guo Jing said, "Then who is Qiu Qian Ren?" He replied, "What difference does it make? Isn't it the same if I'm Qian Ren or he is? We were pretty close since young, so we share the same name." Guo Jing said, "Quick, tell me." Huang Rong said, "Isn't it obvious? He's the impersonator." Guo Jing said, "Eh, old man, then what's your name?" He could not avoid the question so he said, "I remember Father called me something like 'Qian Zhang'. I felt it didn't sound nice, so I didn't use it." Guo Jing laughed, "Ha, you're Qiu Qian Zhang." He replied, "So, what can you do about that? Ten 'chi' makes one 'zhang', and 7 'chi' make one 'ren', so 1000 'zhang' is longer than 1000 'ren' by 3000 'chi'." (Refers to the meaning of their names.) Huang Rong said, "I think you should change your name to 'Qian Fen' (1000 cm)."

Guo Jing said, "Why is he yelling there? What doesn't he come up?" Qiu Qian Zhang said, "Without my orders, who dares come up?" Guo Jing half-believed him. Huang Rong said, "Brother Jing, don't trust this wily old fox. Hit his 'Tian Tu' accupoint!" Guo Jing stretched out finger and tapped it.

This accupoint was beneath the throat, and once hit, Qiu Qian Zhang felt as though a thousand ants were crawling all over him, and he felt extremely numb and itchy. He kept squealing, "Ah! Ah, are you trying to kill me?" Guo Jing, "Then answer me now and I'll release you." Qiu Qian Zhang shouted, "Alright, I can't win you." Bearing with the discomfort, he revealed everything. So Qiu Qian Ren and Qiu Qian Zhang were actually twins, and their similarities in looks made it difficult to differentiate them. When they were 13, Qiu Qian Ren unintentionally saved the life of the previous Iron Palm Sect Leader; The Leader repaid him by teaching him all his martial arts. When he was 24, Qiu Qian Ren's martial arts were very outstanding, so when the

previous leader passed away, he became the new sect leader. With his talent and determination, he managed to expand his sect and improve its reputation; hence Jiang Hu was well aware of the name “Iron Palms Floating On Water.” During the first Mt. Hua Sword meet, Wang Chong Yang invited him, but though his palm skills were powerful, he knew he was no match for Wang Chong Yang, so he declined to attend the tournament. During the past decade he practiced diligently, hoping to clinch the ‘World No. 1’ title at the 2<sup>nd</sup> Mt. Hua Sword Meet. It was at this stage that Qiu Qian Zhang took on his brother’s name for himself to brag around outside. The one Guo Jing and Huang Rong met at Gui Yun Manor and Lin’an Mansion was Qiu Qian Zhang. Because of their resemblance and Huang Rong’s carelessness, she sustained such a life-threatening injury. Now this second segment of the middle ‘finger’ was designated as the burial ground for all the previous leaders. The leader would enter this cave to await death when he was about to breathe his last. If the leader died while away, it was considered an honor for any disciple to bring the leader’s remains inside and die with him. Hence, it was declared a sacred and forbidden ground and all who entered must not leave alive. Therefore, when Guo Jing and Huang Rong barged into the cave, the members could only curse them from a distance as none dared enter. Even the leader himself had to stoop to cursing them. Why then, did Qiu Qian Zhang dare to enter? Whenever a leader was close to death, he had to bring his favorite weapons and treasures with him, so the cave accumulated a lot of valuables. Hence, Qiu Qian Zhang wanted the weapons for himself to show off. He never expected to see Guo Jing and Huang Rong turn up here. Guo Jing listened to his narration and thought, “This place is forbidden to them, but there’s no other way down, how do we get out of this?” Huang Rong said, “Brother Jing, try looking inside.” Guo Jing said,

“Allow me to check your injuries first.” He lit a torch and proceeded to undo her outer dress and Soft Armour. Her snow-white shoulders revealed two black palm-marks, indicating the grave condition of the injuries. If left untreated, the injuries would eventually claim her life. Guo Jing thought, “Ouyang Feng and Qiu Qian Ren’s martial arts are about the same, so Huang Rong’s injuries are probably just as a huge problem as Master’s injuries.” He stared into blank space. Qiu Qian Zhang yelled, “What rubbish is this lass talking now? Hurry up and unseal my accupoint. The itch is killing me, why don’t you try it yourself?” Guo Jing, though, was oblivious to all that.

Huang Rong smiled, “Silly boy, relax. Release that old man.” Guo Jing then walked over and released his accupoint. Qiu Qian Zhang’s itch stopped but his ‘Yin Du’ accupoint was still sealed, so he remained motionless apart from his pupils. Guo Jing found a 2-foot long club and lit it as a torch, saying, “Rong-er, I’ll go take a look inside, will you be OK here alone?” Huang Rong’s temperature rose and dropped rapidly and the pain was almost unbearable, but she forced a smile, “With this old man, I’m not afraid, go ahead.”

Guo Jing raised up the torch and treaded carefully. After 2 turns, he came to a large natural cave which was 10 times larger than the cave outside. He scanned the room and observed many skeletons; some sitting, some lying, some scattered on the ground while some had missing bones. Each skeleton had some sort of weapon or treasure at its side. Guo Jing dreamily thought, “These ex-leaders must have been the great men of their day, yet today they are reduced to bones. Still, at least they have each other for company. This is good; at least it beats being buried alone.” It was as though he did not notice the weapons and treasure in his anxiety for Huang Rong. Just as he was about to leave, he happened to lay his eyes on a wooden box



next to a skeleton. He shone his torch on it and looked closely and saw the inscription, "Secrets to Overcoming the Jin," He started, "Maybe this is the manual by Grand Marshal Yue," He tugged at the box when the skeleton suddenly 'leapt' toward him.

Guo Jing was shocked and hurriedly jumped back while the skeleton smashed on the ground. He grabbed the box and dashed out. He then supported Huang Rong up and opened the box in front of her. There were two books inside. Flipping through the first book, Guo Jing saw that its contents were Yue Fei's essays and other literary works. As he glanced through the words and passages he was filled with a strong surge of loyalty and righteousness, and he sighed in admiration. Huang Rong said, "Read a passage to me." He flipped through casually and recited the passage <The Five Hill Treaties>, "Since the strife in the Central Plains began, the Barbarians have invaded, anger flowed like the spring river; rising united, armies assembled, fighting hundreds of battles. Though we failed to advance far, we cleansed their lair, and swiftly ending the feud between states. Yet today the lone army marches on, for Yixing. The war of Jing Kang defeated and humiliated our lands, and our hatred will not rein our horses. The troops lay in wait for the enemy, raising the morale of the soldiers; battling through time, moving through the northern desert, shedding blood in the cities, exterminating the Barbarians, welcoming the return of the 2 sages, capturing their land; the Imperial Court had no worries, the Emperor slept in peace, and so Yue Fei wrote." The passage summarized Yue Fei's life ambitions. Though Guo Jing's literacy was limited, he was filled with the desire to serve the people. While he read some of the words wrongly, he nevertheless felt the essay was extremely well written.

If they were back at Gui Yun manor, Qiu Qian Zhang would not have hesitated to mock and scorn Yue Fei, but now he feared his accupoint would be sealed again. Though he was not well informed about Yue Fei, he still nodded his head, saying, "Yes, it's indeed well written, and a worthy hero is reading a hero's essay, nothing could be better."

Huang Rong sighed, "No wonder Father kept lamenting that he was born decades late; if not he would definitely meet such a great hero. Please recite his poems," Guo Jing went through a few poems, and some like <The Crimson River> were familiar to her, while others like <Title of a soldier's pavilion> were new to her.

The Iron Palm Sect members continued to shout and curse; Guo Jing let Huang Rong's head rest on his thigh while he continued to recite Yue Fei's works, "The title is <Title of the Sun Dragon's Residence> : At the Wei Mountain Monastery, the mountain spring defeats the stillness. At the Buddha's statue in Zijin, the snow covered the old monk's head. The cold lake water welcomes a new month, and the pine tree welcomes the autumn wind. I leave the dragon's words, hoping to aid the people in the storm." The wind blew and the birds chirped as Huang Rong rested snugly in Guo Jing's arms. Guo Jing said, "Grand Marshal Yue deeply remembered the suffering of the people; he is a true hero indeed." Huang Rong nodded and smiled, "The young hero is reading the works of a great hero while and old 'hero' is listening in. How redundant." She then asked, "What's the contents of the other book?" Guo Jing read a few lines inside and excitedly exclaimed, "This... this is really Grand Marshal Yue's hand written text on the war strategies! Wanyan Hong Lie would never have imagined that this it. Fortunately it's not been taken by him." On the first page was written, in 18 bold words: Repeatedly examine plans, Tough/rigorous training, Equal rewards/punishments, Clear

uncompromising orders, Fair/just rules, Everyone sharing hardship.

As they were reading, the shouting below abruptly ceased and not a single voice was heard. Suddenly, they were left in the unnatural silence. Guo Jing and Huang Rong listened carefully and heard the crackling of burning grass in the distance as Qiu Qian Zhang groaned loudly, "Today you 2 dolls have caused my destruction." In his panic, he called them "dolls" again. Guo Jing rushed out and saw a whole wall of fire swiftly burning towards them. As the mountain was filled with tall grass, the flames rapidly spread to form a sea of fire.

Guo Jing gasped, "They don't dare step into this forbidden territory, so they're attacking by fire. The cave doesn't have any flammable objects, but we'd surely be fried." He immediately grabbed Huang Rong when he heard Qiu Qian Zhang screaming on the ground, so he kicked him lightly to unseal his accupoint to let him make his own escape. He then snatched the wooden box and ran up the mountain. They were still a few hundred metres from the summit. Guo Jing gathered his concentration and sprinted upwards with Qiu Qian Zhang following behind. Guo Jing looked down and saw the fire spreading in the distance and knew that thought they temporarily safe, it would not be for long, so he gave a long sigh. Huang Rong suddenly said, "Grand Marshal Yue's given name is 'Fei' (fly), styled 'Crane'. Let's try 'Condor', how about that?" Guo Jing asked, "What condor?" Huang Rong said, "Call the condors up to fetch us down." Guo Jing jumped up and exclaimed, "That would be fun. I'll summon them. But I'm not sure they can take our weight." Huang Rong sighed, "After all we're heading for doom, so we might as well take the risk." Guo Jing sat properly and gathered his Qi in his Dan Tian and made a loud, shrill whistle which propagated in all directions. This

was the result of his internal energy training under Ma Yu, and with the [Nine Yin Manual], his internal energy improved by leaps and bounds. Though it was quite a great distance between the base and the summit, it was not long before the condors flew up and stopped in front of them. Guo Jing helped Huang Rong remove the Soft Armour and placed her on a condor's back. He was worried that she might not be able to hold on tightly to it with her injury, so he strapped her down with a cloth belt. Mounting the other condor, he whistled and the condors flapped their wings. They trembled greatly as they took off, but once in flight, the condors stabilized. At first, Guo Jing feared that he might be too heavy, but once it spread its wings, it flew effortlessly. Huang Rong, being a child at heart, felt this was an interesting sight, so she guided the condor towards Qiu Qian Zhang and it glided gracefully past him. Qiu Qian Zhang was shocked and shouted, "Miss, take me along. The fire will consume me soon!" Huang Rong laughed, "It can't take the weight of 2 people. Why don't you try begging your brother? Since he's shorter by 3000 chi, wouldn't he listen to you?" She tapped the bird and flew away; Qiu Qian Zhang became more and more nervous and called out, "Miss, don't you think this is interesting?" Her curiosity was aroused and she turned around to what he was up to. Suddenly, he launched himself forward, throwing his body off the mountain to grab her. He knew that either way he would die, so he took such a desperate gamble. With the sudden increase in weight, the condor plunged swiftly. It flapped its wings frantically but still could not produce enough lift. Qiu Qian Zhang grabbed Huang Rong's back and tried to yank her off and toss her down, but she was strapped to the condor which prevented her from falling off. They were about to plunge to their death, and the Iron Palm Sect members who witnessed them were too shocked to speak. At this critical moment, Guo Jing's condor flew straight at them and pecked at Qiu Qian Zhang's head. He felt a sharp

pain shoot through his head and he stretched out his hands to shield his head. But he lost his grip and flipped downwards, screaming madly as he fell into the valley below. The decrease in weight allowed the condor to regain its thrust and it gained altitude. The two condors then flew north.

## **End of Chapter 28.**

### Author's Note:

Yue Fei's poem <The crimson River> ( 血紅河 ) was very well known, but the Song Dynasty had no known records of it. Yue Fei and Sun Yue He's <Jin Soldier's Passages> and <Domestic Calling Volume>, a compilation of Yue Fei's literary works have not been found to date. The text quoted above first appeared in the Ming Dynasty, so some believe that it belongs to the works of Ming Dynasty authors. Some sources claim that these works are of no value as they merely used Yue Fei's name for the works.

# Chapter 29 - The Lady of the Black Marsh

Translated by Frans Soetomo



*On the long table were seven oil lamps, arranged in the Big Dipper formation; on the ground squatted a grey-haired lady, her attention focused on the countless bamboo strips scattered on the ground. So deep was her concentration that even when she heard people come in, she did not raise her head to look.*

Riding on the back of the eagle Guo Jing repeatedly shouted, calling the little red horse on the ground to follow them. In a short moment the pair of eagles had covered quite a distance. Although this pair of eagles was extraordinarily big, they were not able to fly too far while carrying humans on their back. Not too long afterwards, they started to descend and finally landed on the ground.

Guo Jing immediately jumped down the eagle's back and rushed to see Huang Rong's condition. He found out that Huang Rong had passed out while on the eagle's back. Hastily he untied her belt and massaged her pulse. After a while Huang Rong regained her consciousness, but she was still in a daze and was unable to utter any word.

By that time the dark clouds were hanging on the sky, blocking the moon and stars from shining their lights to the ground. Having barely escaped from death, when he recalled what had just happened Guo Jing still shivered with fear. He held Huang Rong in his hands, standing in the middle of the wilderness. He felt the world was vast and obscure and did not know where he should go. He did not dare to call his little red horse for fear that Qiu Qianren would hear his call.

After standing still for half a day, he had no choice but to start walking. Every step he took he treaded on either a bush or tall grass; there was no pathway at all. His calves were pricked by thorns along the way. Although feeling the

pain, he doggedly walked forward. All around him was pitch-black; even if he tried to open his eyes wide he still could not see his hands in front of his eyes. He was forced to walk very slow, for fear that he would step into an empty space; yet because he feared the Iron Palm Clan people would pursue, he did not dare to pause.

After walking miserably for about two 'li's [1 li is approximately 0.5 km] suddenly he saw a big star twinkling low on the horizon to his left. He looked attentively, trying to get his bearing; he found out that that was not a star, but a fire light. And where there was light, there were bound to be people around. Guo Jing was delighted; he sped up his footsteps walking directly to that light. He saw that the light sometimes disappeared among the tree; it looked like the source of that light was inside a thick forest ahead of him. But once he entered the forest he was unable to walk straight, the pathway was bent to the east and turned to the west, so very soon he lost sight of the light. It was difficult to see where he was going in that thick forest, so he jumped up a tree and looked around; he found out that the light was already behind him.

He walked back, but very soon he lost sight again. After seemingly walking in circles his head was spinning; no matter where he went, he simply could not reach that light. He was thinking about his pair of eagles and his horse, but did not know where they went. He was thinking about jumping from tree to tree, but it was so dark that he could not see where to step; also he was afraid the tree branches would hurt Huang Rong. But they had to find lodging for the night for he knew they could not stay in this dark forest waiting for dawn. He determined to keep walking even if he had to bump his head on the trees. Therefore, he decided to calm down and caught his breath first, taking a short break.



By now Huang Rong had slowly regained her consciousness; on Guo Jing's back she felt how he walked around, turning to the east and curving to the west. Although she could not see anything she began to understand the pathway of the forest. "Jing Gege, walk diagonally to the right," she said in low voice.

"Rong'er, are you all right?" Guo Jing happily asked.

Huang Rong mumbled indistinctly, she was still too weak to speak. Guo Jing walked following her direction. Huang Rong silently counted his footsteps. After about seventeen steps she said, "Walk to the left eight steps." Guo Jing followed her instruction. Huang Rong again said, "Walk diagonally to the right again for thirteen steps."

With one giving direction the other following, two people made a good progress in that pitch-black winding forest pathway. When Guo Jing walked back and forth earlier, Huang Rong had deduced correctly that this pathway was manmade. She had partially mastered Huang Yaoshi's wonderful 'wu xing qi men' [five ways strange/wonderful/mysterious gates] technique; even though the pathway was confusing, she could see it clearly with her eyes closed. If it were daylight, she would have arrived sooner, but in the dark she could not identify any safe trail at all.

By following Huang Rong's instructions, Guo Jing walked sometimes to the left, sometimes to the right, sometimes diagonally several steps to the left or to the right; sometimes seemingly he walked further away from the light, but in less than a time needed to drink a cup of tea the light source suddenly appeared in front of them. Guo Jing was delighted, he dashed forward.

"Not too fast!" Huang Rong anxiously called out. "Aiyo!" Guo Jing cried out. His feet sank straight into a moat. Quickly he kicked his feet to pull out from the moat. Once they were back on solid ground, a strong fume of mud from his feet attacked their nostrils. They looked ahead and vaguely saw two thatched huts surrounded by a thin layer of mist. The light was coming from these huts.

Guo Jing loudly called out, "We are passing visitors, also suffering a serious injury. We beseech the master of the house to grant us a place to rest and some water to drink." But after waiting for half a day no reply came out from the huts. Guo Jing called again, but still nobody answered. After calling out for the third time a female voice answered from the huts, "You can get this far, certainly you have the ability to enter the house. Must I come out to greet you?" Her voice was exceptionally cold and indifferent; obviously she did not welcome the visitor and did not want to be disturbed.

Under normal circumstances Guo Jing would prefer spending the night in the forest, he also hated to deliberately disturb unwelcoming host; but for now Huang Rong's well-being was more important to him. However, in front of him was a wide marsh, which he did not know how to cross; therefore, with a low voice he discussed this thing over with Huang Rong.

Huang Rong thought for a moment then said, "These huts are built in the middle of a pond of mud. Take a look clearly and tell me whether the shapes of those huts are one square and the other round."

Guo Jing opened up his eye wide for a moment then he exclaimed, "That's right! Rong'er, you know everything."

“Go to the back of that round hut, from there walk straight to the light three steps, then turn diagonally to the left four steps, then straight three steps and diagonally to the right four steps. By carefully walking straight and diagonally like this, you won’t make a wrong step,” Huang Rong said.

Guo Jing followed her instruction to the letter; and sure enough, every time he stepped his foot down, he would step on a submerged wooden stake. Only those wooden stakes were not firm, some of them wobbled and some were planted on an angle; if his lightness kungfu was not good, they would fall into the marsh. He focused all his attention to walk three steps diagonally and four steps straight; and after walking a total of 119 steps they arrived at the front of the square hut.

The hut was actually without a door. Huang Rong whispered, “From here you jump forward, make sure you land on the left side.”

Carrying Huang Rong on his back Guo Jing jumped forward and landed on the left side, he could not help but feel amazed, “Everything is exactly as Rong’er has anticipated.”

There was a courtyard inside the wall, which was divided into two parts: on the left was solid ground, while on the right was a pond. Guo Jing crossed the courtyard and entered the main hall. Outside the hall was a moon gate without any door on it. “Go straight ahead,” Huang Rong said, “There is nothing strange from here on.”

Guo Jing nodded. With a loud and clear voice he said, “The passing visitors took the liberty to enter the house; I beg the esteemed host to forgive our boldness.” He waited for a moment then proceeded to enter the hall.

Inside the hall there was a long table; on it were seven oil lamps, arranged in the Big Dipper formation. On the

ground squatted a grey-haired lady, her clothes were made from coarse fabric. Her attention was focused on the countless bamboo strip scattered on the ground; so deep was her concentration that even when she heard people came in, she did not raise her head to look.

Guo Jing gently lowered Huang Rong on a chair. Under the lamp light they saw that lady's countenance to be thin and pallid, as if she did not have any blood; they felt compassionate toward her. Guo Jing was about to open his mouth asking for some water but seeing that lady so engrossed in whatever she was doing, he was afraid to interrupt her train of thought; hence he refrained from making any noise.

After sitting down for a moment, Huang Rong's spirit was slightly revived. She saw the bamboo strips on the ground to be approximately four 'cun's [about 13cm or 5inches] long and two 'fen's [about 7mm or 1/2 inch] wide; they were bamboo strips usually used for calculation. Again she looked closer, those computation were based on 'shang, shi, fa, jie' [business/commerce, reality, law, lending (money)] method of calculation with four decimal point. Right now she was calculating the square root of 55,225; with the 'shang' position had shown the result to be 230. But that lady was still struggling with the third digit.

Huang Rong quipped, "Five! Two hundred and thirty five!"

That old lady was startled, she raised her head, her eyes were gleaming, looking at Huang Rong with a penetrating gaze, and then immediately lowered her head to continue her calculation. When she raised her head, Guo and Huang, two people saw her face; it was simple and beautiful. They believed she was not even forty years of age yet. Perhaps the hair on her temples had turned grey because she had too much in her mind.

After computing for while, the lady figured out the answer was indeed 'five'; she raised her head to look at Huang Rong again. She looked confounded, but also angry, as if she was going to say, "You are but a young girl; you have made a lucky guess, what's so strange about that? Just don't mess with my business here." She wrote down '235' five characters [er bai san shi wu] on a piece of paper, then proceed to the next problem.

This time she was looking for the cube root of 34,012,224. She started by putting down the 'shang' and 'shi' and 'fang' [square], followed by 'lian' [inexpensive], 'yu' [corner] and 'xia' [lower], six strips; and found the first digit to be 'three'.

Huang Rong softly said, "Three hundred and twenty four."

That lady uttered an 'Hmm' sound, how could she believe her? She continued calculating for a long time, and after a time needed to drink a cup of tea later, the result came out, it was indeed '324'.

That lady straightened up her back and stood up; it appeared that her forehead was full of wrinkles, but her cheeks were full, her face looked round. The upper half of her face look old, the lower half looked young, looked like both parts differed by as much as twenty years. Her eyes stared at Huang Rong, suddenly she pointed toward the inner room and said, "Come with me." She took an oil lamp and walked in.

Guo Jing propped Huang Rong up and followed her inside. The inner room's wall was round; the floor was covered with fine sand. On the sand were written many weird symbols, vertical and horizontal lines and circles; also some characters such as 'tai' [great], 'tian yuan' [first/primary

sky], 'di yuan' [first/primary earth], 'ren yuan' [first/primary human], and 'wu yuan' [first/primary object].

Guo Jing had no idea what they were; he was afraid to mess these symbols up, so he stopped at the door and did not dare to step into the room.

Since her childhood Huang Rong had been trained by her father in all kinds of mathematics. She looked at the symbols on the ground and immediately recognized it was an advance technique in mathematics called the 'tian yuan zhi shu' [sky primary technique]. Even though it looked complicated, it should not be too difficult to solve as long as one understood the principle.

**[Author's note:** It very much resembles the modern day algebra. Our country since the ancient times had developed this calculation technique, with 'tian', 'di', 'ren' and 'wu' as four unknown variables; much like the X, Y, X and W variables in western algebra]

Huang Rong pulled the bamboo stick from her waist; leaning on Guo Jing she started writing on the sand. In a short while all seven, eight mathematics problems on the sand were solved. That lady had painstakingly tried to solve those problems in months; seeing the solutions, she could not help but feeling deeply confounded. She was silent for half a day then suddenly asked, "Who are you?"

Huang Rong showed a faint smile and replied, "What's so special about 'tian yuan si [four] yuan zhi shu'? The mathematics book has nineteen primaries, after the 'ren' there are 'xian' [immortal], 'ming' [bright], 'xiao' [firmament], 'han' [from Han dynasty], 'lei' [rampart], 'ceng' [layer], 'gao' [high], 'shang' [top/above], and 'tian' [sky]. Before the 'ren' are 'di' [earth/ground], 'xia' [below/under], 'di' [low], 'jian' [subtract], 'luo' [drop], 'shi'

[die], 'quan' [fountain], 'an' [hidden/secret], and 'gui' [sly/crafty]. Once you mastered the nineteenth primary, all problems will look easy!"

That lady looked dejected, her body trembled; she dropped to the ground, holding her head in her hands as she was lost, deep in thought. A moment later she raised her head and with a delighted face asked, "Your mathematics skill is a hundred times better than mine, but let me ask you this: you have a three by three array of number one thru nine, no matter how you add it up, vertically, horizontally or diagonally, the sum of any three numbers has to be fifteen. How do you arrange it?"

Huang Rong thought, "My father established the Peach Blossom Island based on the five ways variation; what's so mysterious about it? The 'jiu gong' [nine palace or halls] is the foundation of the Peach Blossom Island diagram; how could I not know about it?" Therefore, with a calm voice she recited, "The 'jiu gong' diagram is constructed like the pattern on the turtle shell [Translator's note: do a google search with keyword 'Lo Shu Square']; four and two are the shoulders, eight and six are the feet. Three on the left and seven on the right; put on nine and tread on one, while five occupies the center." While reciting this she made a diagram of the 'jiu gong' on the sand.

That lady's countenance turned ashen, she sighed, "I thought I developed this secret formula. Turned out there is a song about it handed down for generations."

Huang Rong smiled, "Not only 'jiu gong', even four by four array, or five by five, down to the hundred by hundred array, are not too difficult," she said, "Take four by four array for example; we have 16 numbers in four rows. First we determine the four corner pairs; one and sixteen made a pair, so are four and thirteen. Then we determine the four

pairs inside; six and eleven make a pair, so are seven and ten. This way the sums of all horizontal, vertical, and diagonal rows are all 34.”

That lady made the diagram on the sand and sure enough, it was as Huang Rong had said. Huang Rong continued, “Each hall of that nine halls diagram can be transformed into ‘ba gua’ [eight-diagram]. Eight by nine equal to 72 numbers. These numbers: 1 to 72 loop around the ‘jiu gong’ like wreaths. Each loop consists of eight numbers; each four-loop forms another bigger loop, there are four corner loops altogether, which make the total number of loops to be 13. The sum of the numbers in each loop is 292. This diagram variation recorded in the Luo Shu [luo – name of a river, shu – book] is divinely wonderful; no wonder you are not aware of it.” While explaining it, Huang Rong also drew the 72 numbers of the eight diagrams of the nine halls on the sand.

The lady was dumbfounded, she faltered and asked, “Miss, who are you?” But before Huang Rong could answer her, she felt a shot of pain on her chest; her face paled, and anxiously she took a vial from her pocket and swallowed a green pill from the vial. After half a day her face relaxed, she sighed and said, “It’s finished, it’s finished!” Two drops of tears rolled down her cheeks.

Guo Jing and Huang Rong looked at each other; they thought this lady’s behavior was so weird.

That lady had not spoken anything when suddenly there was an intermittent call from the outside. It was the Iron Palm Clan pursuers. “Are they friends or enemies?” the lady asked.

“They are enemies pursuing us,” Guo Jing said.

“Iron Palm Clan?” the lady asked.



“Yes,” Guo Jing replied.

The lady inclined her ear to listen for a while and then said, “Qiu Bangzhu [Clan Leader Qiu] personally leads his clan to pursue. Who are you actually?” When asking this her voice was stern.

Guo Jing moved forward one step, stood up in front of Huang Rong, and with poise in his voice he said, “We are the Nine-fingered Divine Beggar Hong Bangzhu’s disciples. My martial sister is injured by the Iron Palm Clan’s Qiu Qianren. We took refuge here. If Senior has a close relation to the Iron Palm Clan and is unwilling to give us shelter; then we will take our leave.” Having said this he raised his cupped fist and then turned around to help Huang Rong stood up.

That lady smiled indifferently and said, “You are young, yet so mule-headed. You can survive but do you think your martial sister can? So you are Hong Qigong’s disciples, no wonder you have this kind of skill.”

She heard the shouts of Iron Palm Clan people were sometimes far and sometimes near, sometimes high and sometimes low; she sighed and said, “They can’t find the way, they can’t come in; just relax. Even if they manage to enter, you are my guests, how can Divine ... Divine ... Ying Gu let other people bully her esteemed guests?” She thought, “Originally I was called ‘shen suan zi’ [Divine Mathematician] Ying Gu; but this young miss’ mathematical skill is a hundred times better than mine. How could I call myself ‘shen suan zi’ anymore?” Therefore, she only said the first word ‘shen’ but could not bring herself to utter the next two characters.

Guo Jing bowed to express his gratitude. Ying Gu slipped the clothes from Huang Rong’s shoulder to see her injury.

She creased her brows but did not say anything; she took the vial from her bosom and dissolved the green pill in a bowl of water.

Huang Rong took the bowl but she hesitated, they did not know whether the lady was a friend or a foe; how could she took her medicine?

Ying Gu saw her hesitation, she coldly said, "You are injured by Qiu Qianren's Iron Palm; do you still think you can recover? If I want to harm you, do you think I need to bother myself? This medicine is a pain-reliever; you don't want it? Fine!" She grabbed the bowl back and poured the content on the ground.

Seeing her rudeness toward Huang Rong, Guo Jing was unable to restrain his anger. "My martial sister is seriously injured; how can you be so mad at her?" he said, "Rong'er, let's go."

Ying Gu coldly smiled and said, "Ying Gu's two small huts; do you think two juniors like you can easily come and easily go?" With two bamboo strips in her hands, she stood on the doorway, blocking the exit.

Guo Jing thought, "Talk is useless, must use force." He called out, "Senior, forgive me for being rude." He bent his knees a little bit; making a circle with his arms he launched the Proud Dragon Repents straight to the door. This stance was his fiercest one; he was afraid Ying Gu could not resist it, so he only used 30% of his strength. His intention was simply to clear the way; he did not want to harm anybody. As the gust of wind arrived at Ying Gu's body, Guo Jing watched closely how Ying Gu would block this attack; whether he should increase his strength or retract it immediately. Who would have thought that Ying Gu only leaned her body slightly, her left palm made a diagonal

moved to lightly push his arm and Guo Jing's strength was diverted sideways.

Guo Jing did not expect her to possess such a high skill; he was pushed forward half a step from the momentum of his own force. Ying Gu was also surprised that with such strong attack Guo Jing was able to hold his stance firmly on the sand and did not fall down. From this one exchange, both were secretly admiring their opponent's skill.

"Kid, have you learned your Shifu's entire skill?" Ying Gu loudly called out. While shouting out she used her bamboo strip to hit the 'qu ze' [crooked marsh] acupoint on the bend of Guo Jing's right arm. It was a vital acupoint, Guo Jing did not dare to neglect this attack. He counterattacked with another stance from the 18-Dragon Subduing Palms.

After exchanging several moves Guo Jing realized that Ying Gu's martial art was purely 'yin' [negative, female] in character, from the 'soft' side. Obviously she did not have a single frontal strike, but each one of her moves contained a lethal counter-strike; if Guo Jing did not know mutual hands combat, he would have been injured early on.

The more he fought, the more he did not dare to underestimate her; gradually he increased the strength of his palms, but Ying Gu's martial art was one of a kind; her stances appeared to be soft and powerless, yet it was like a mercury flowing swiftly, penetrating every hole, making her very nearly impossible to guard against.

Several moves later Guo Jing was compelled to withdraw two steps back. Suddenly he remembered Hong Qigong's advice when he was sparring with Huang Rong's 'luo ying shen jian zhang' [falling leaves divine sword palm technique]; that regardless of thousands of changes or tens of thousands variations the opponent used, he should

ignore them all and keep fighting using the '18-Dragon Subduing Palms' to secure a victory.

Initially he thought he did not have any desire to fight; besides, the lady looked like a good and kind-hearted Senior. But without having any enmity or committing any wrongdoing she had prevented them from going out the gate. Guo Jing still did not want to be entangled or worse, to injure her life; hence he only used 30% of his strength; who would have thought that this lady was very ferocious. If he was being negligent even so slightly, both of them would die in that place.

Guo Jing took a deep breath, raised up both of his elbows slightly, right hand forming a fist and left hand a palm, one struck vertically, the other pushed horizontally, one quick the other slow, both hands moved out. It was the sixteenth stance of the '18-Dragon Subduing Palms', the 'lu shuang bing zhi' [treading on frost to reach the ice], which was taught by Hong Qigong at the Liu ancestral hall in Baoying. Within this stance hard and soft complemented each other, upright and upside down completed each other; its advantage was unlimited.

Hong Qigong's martial art was from the 'hard' and 'yang' [positive, male] side, but when the hardness reached its peak, by default there would be softness in the middle of hardness. The fundamental of this martial art can be found in the Book of Changes ['I Ching'], where the older 'yang' gave birth to the younger 'yin'. Hence, within the Proud Dragon Repents and the Treading on Frost to Reach the Ice the hard energy and soft power blended together and was impossible to distinguish.

"Ah!" Ying Gu softly exclaimed and hastily eluded; she managed to get away from Guo Jing's right fist, but was hit

by his left kick. She also could not avoid Guo Jing's horizontal left palm, which pushed her right shoulder.

As his palm strength hit its target, Guo Jing was certain she would be pushed back against the wall. He was afraid the dirt wall of this thatched-roof hut would not be strong enough and collapse; but strangely as his palm was touching her shoulder he felt like her body was covered with a layer of exceptionally slippery thick lubricant that his palm slipped to her side. But her body was also shaking and the two pieces of bamboo strips in her hand fell to the ground.

Guo Jing was startled, quickly he restrained his force; but Ying Gu's agility was extraordinary, she had already taken advantage of a favorable situation. Her ten fingers shot forward and attacked the 'shen feng' [divine grace] and 'yu shu' [jade letter] acupoints on Guo Jing's chest. Her acupoint sealing technique was excellent.

Guo Jing found it was too late to parry; he leaned slightly to the side. His move resembled the stance he used just now, but a killing strike was concealed within the move. Something stirred in his heart, "Her acupoint sealing technique is somewhat similar to Zhou Dage's [Big Brother Zhou]; if I had not practiced with Zhou Dage for thousands and tens of thousands times in that cave, I wouldn't be able to avoid her attack just now."

Ying Gu felt a burst of energy coming out from Guo Jing's body through his right arm heading toward her own arm; she realized that if her arms were hit by the enemy's power, her arms would be broken for sure. Hence once again she used her Loach Maneuver to make Guo Jing's palm slipped by her shoulder.

These several moves were very exquisite, each one of them was unanticipated by the opponent; both were startled, they leaped back several steps almost simultaneously, both were taking defensive position. Guo Jing thought, "This lady's martial art is so weird! If I can't touch her, then I will be the one who will always fall under attack."

Ying Gu was also astonished, she thought, "This youngster is so young, how can he possess this kind of martial art skill?" Following which she thought, "I have been hiding here for more than a dozen of years, diligently training hard; inadvertently mastering a wonderful martial art skill, thinking I have become invincible in the world, very soon I can go out of this forest to seek revenge and to rescue someone. Who would have thought that in mathematics I am inferior to this young girl by a long shot, in term of martial art I can't even match this youngster who is still wet behind his ears? Much less he is carrying somebody on his back. If we fight for real, I would have lost early on. For dozens of years I endured pain and suffering, will it all be flushed in running water? Shall I give up my desire to seek revenge and rescue someone?" Having thought this, her eyes turned red and her nose ache; she could not restrain tears from rolling down her cheeks.

Guo Jing knew the strength of his own palm had shaken her, he busily said, "Junior had rudely offended Senior, I truly did not mean it; please forgive me and let us go."

Ying Gu noticed that while speaking Guo Jing repeatedly looked at Huang Rong with utmost concern in his face. She recalled her own misfortune, how she was separated from her lover and could not see each other until that day; her jealousy raged and she coldly said, "This girl was hit by Qiu Qianren's Iron Palm. There is a dark shadow on her face, she won't live to see the fourth day; why are you still concerned about her?"

Guo Jing was shocked, straightaway he examined Huang Rong's face, and indeed he could see a layer of dark shadow in between her eyebrows like it was smeared with ink. His heart turned cold, immediately he held Huang Rong up and with a trembling voice asked, "Rong'er, you ... how do you feel?"

Huang Rong felt her chest and abdomen fiery hot while her four limbs were icy cold. She knew that that lady did not speak nonsense; she sighed and said, "Jing Gege, during these three days, don't ever leave me even for a single step. Can you?"

"I ... I won't leave you even for half a step," Guo Jing said.

Ying Gu sneered and said, "Even if you won't leave her for half a step, you will only have seventy-two hours."

Guo Jing raised his head up, his eyes full of tears. He looked at that lady earnestly implored her not to say anything that might hurt Huang Rong's feeling.

Ying Gu was an unfortunate woman, dozens of years of suffering had given her a calloused heart. Seeing these two people who loved each other were going through a disaster, her heart was filled with delight. She was going to say something to hurt their feeling when she saw Guo Jing's miserable expression. Suddenly an idea come flashing like a lightning strike in her mind, she thought, "Ah, ah, the heaven sent these two here to help me fulfill my wish to revenge." She lifted her head and mused, "Heaven, oh Heaven!"

At that time the sound of people shouting outside the forest was getting louder. Apparently they had searched everywhere and came to the conclusion that Jing and Rong, two people were still in the forest; only they were unable to find the way to enter.

After about half a day, Qiu Qianren's voice was heard calling out from outside the forest, "Divine Mathematician Ying Gu, Qiu from the Iron Palm requests an audience." His words were shouted against the wind, but surprisingly could be heard clearly, an indication of a profound internal energy.

Ying Gu walked to the window, gather her 'qi' on her 'dan tian' and shouted back, "I usually don't see outsiders; whoever comes to the black marsh die, don't you know it?"

"There were one man and one woman who came into your black marsh; please deliver them to me," Qiu Qianren replied.

"Who can come into my black marsh? Qiu Bangzhu underestimates Ying Gu too much," Ying Gu called out.

Qiu Qianren let out a 'hey, hey, hey' cold laugh; seemed like he believed her words. Then they heard the shouting of the Iron Palm Clan people gradually getting father away. Ying Gu turned around to Guo Jing and asked, "Do you want to save your martial sister?"

Guo Jing was dumbstruck, immediately he bent his knees to kneel down and said, "If Senior is willing to give direction ..."

Ying Gu's face suddenly appeared to be covered with a layer of frost, sternly said, "Senior! Do you think I am old?"

"No, no!" Guo Jing hastily said, "Not too old."

Slowly Ying Gu's eyes moved from Guo Jing to look outside the window, she muttered softly, "Not too old. Hmm, after all, that means I am old."

Guo Jing was happy and anxious at the same time; listening to the way she talked, looked like Huang Rong could be saved. But his words had offended her, he was not sure if



she was still willing to render assistance. He wanted to say something to correct himself, but actually did not know what to say.

Ying Gu turned back to him, saw him to be sweating profusely, looking so distressed; there was a stab of pain in her heart, "If only my man showed one-tenth of the compassion this dumb kid has, ay, my life won't be in vain," she said in her heart. Then she softly recited, "'Four weaving machines, the weaving of mandarin ducks desiring to fly together right away. It's a pity; not yet old but the hair on the head has turned white. When the green spring grass ripples, in the deepest of dawn's cold, standing face to face taking a bath wearing red clothes.'"

Listening to her reciting this short poem, Guo Jing's heart was stirred, he silently thought, "It sounds familiar, I have heard it before." But tried as he might, he could not remember who wrote it. It was not his Er Shifu [Second Master] Zhu Cong, it was not Huang Rong either; so with a low voice he asked, "Rong'er, who composed the poem she recited? What does it mean?"

Huang Rong shook her head, "This is the first time I hear it, I don't know who composed it. Hmm, 'It's a pity not yet old but the hair on the head has turned white.' That was good! Mandarin ducks always have white head ..." [Translator's note: 'bai tou' literally means 'white head', but can also translated as 'white haired head' or 'old age'] Speaking to this point her eyes involuntarily turned toward Ying Gu's grizzled hair. "Exactly 'It's a pity not yet old but the hair on the head has turned white.'!" she thought.

"Rong'er was taught by her father, she knows everything. If it was a well-known poem, she would definitely know who composed it," Guo Jing thought, "Who recited this poem then? It couldn't be her, couldn't be her father, also I am

sure it couldn't be the Cloud Village's Master Lu. But I am sure I have heard it before. Ay, it doesn't matter who recited this poem as long as this Senior really has a way to save Rong'er. She asked me a question and I gave her a wrong answer. I wish I have a way to make amends. I don't care what she will ask me to do ..."

Presently Ying Gu was still immersed in the memory of her past; her face sometimes showed delight, sometimes showed sadness. In a short moment her heart was recalling decades' worth of gratitude and grudges. Suddenly she raised her head up and said, "Your martial sister has been hit by Qiu's Iron Palm. I don't know if he restrained the strength of his palm, or if it was you who blocked his palm, that she did not die immediately. Either way, in just three short days ... Hmm, there is only one man in this whole wide world who can save her life!"

Guo Jing was listening to every word she said, his heart was thumping madly. Hearing her last sentence he dropped down to his knees and 'bonk, bonk, bonk' knocking his head on the ground three times while calling out, "Please Sen ... No, no. Please, help us. We will be forever grateful."

Ying Gu coldly said, "Humph! Do I have the skill to save others? If I do have this divine power, why do I have to endure a damp and bitterly cold place like this?" Guo Jing did not dare to open his mouth. A moment later Ying Gu continued, "Just consider yourselves lucky you met me and I know this person's whereabouts; also consider yourselves lucky that he lives not too far away; you might be able to reach his place within three days. Only whether that man is willing to help or not, it's really hard to say."

Guo Jing was delighted, "I will earnestly ask him to help," he said, "I believe he won't go so far as seeing someone in distress and doesn't want to help."

Ying Gu smirked, "What do you mean 'won't go so far as seeing someone in distress and doesn't want to help'? Seeing someone dying and do nothing is human's natural behavior. You are going to ask earnestly, do you think other people did not? Do you think you can persuade him to help you? What have you done to him? Why would he want to help you?" Her voice was full of bitterness and resentment.

Guo Jing did not dare to open his mouth; presently there was a ray of hope for Huang Rong, he was afraid he might make a mistake even for half a word and thus ruined this opportunity. He saw that lady walked outside to the square room, sat down at the table, took a pen and started writing.

After writing for a while she folded the paper and wrapped it with a cloth, and then she took a needle and sewn the cloth into a tight pouch. In a similar matter she made three pouches, only then did she return to the round room. "After leaving this forest, avoid the Iron Palm Clan people, go straight northeast. When you arrive within the border of Taiyuan County, open the white pouch. Inside you will find what you are to do in detail. You are not to open the pouch for any reason before you arrive there."

Guo Jing was very happy, he gave his promise repeatedly, and held out his hand to receive the pouch. Ying Gu drew back her hand and said, "Not so fast! If that man is not willing to help, so be it. But if he is willing and can save her life, I have a request to make."

"We have received your kindness," Guo Jing said, "If Senior has anything for us to do, just let us know."

Ying Gu coldly said, "If your martial sister did not die, within a month she has to come back here and stay with me for a year."

"What for?" Guo Jing wondered.

"It's none of your business," Ying Gu sternly said, "I only ask her if she is willing or not?"

Huang Rong interrupted, "You want me to teach you 'qi men shu shu' [lit. strange/wonderful/ mysterious way counting method]. How difficult is that? All right, I give you my promise."

Ying Gu cast her glance toward Guo Jing and mocked, "It's useless for you to be a man; your intelligence is not even one-tenth of your martial sister's." But she handed out the three pouches to him anyway.

Guo Jing held out his hand. Other than the white pouch, he saw the other pouches were red and yellow. He put everything securely in his pocket and then bowed down to express his gratitude.

Ying Gu quickly moved aside, did not want to accept his gratitude. "You don't have to thank me," she said, "I don't need it. You two are neither my family nor my friends, why would I want to save her? Even if we were related you still don't need thank me profusely! Let me be frank with you in advance, I am helping her for my own behalf. Humph, whoever does not do things for themselves, let the Heaven punishes them to their death."

Her words sounded so cruel in Guo Jing's ears, but he had never been good with words, so he did not want to contradict her; besides, this time he had Huang Rong to think about, he did not dare to say anything even more, he simply listened respectfully.

Ying Gu looked at them condescendingly, she said, "You two must be tired tonight, also hungry. Have some porridge."

Huang Rong lied down on a couch, half awake and half asleep. Guo Jing stood by her side with heart full of

disquieting thoughts. A moment later Ying Gu came back with a wooden tray in her hands. There were two big bowls of steaming and sweet-smelling rice porridge on the tray, along with a big plate of wild chicken dish and a small plate of preserved fish.

Guo Jing had been hungry for a while; previously he forgot about food because he was deeply concerned about Huang Rong's condition. Right now he was in a better mood. Seeing the chicken, fish, and rice porridge he was forced to swallow a mouthful of saliva. Gently he tapped Huang Rong's hand and said, "Rong'er, wake up and eat some porridge."

Huang Rong opened her eyes slightly, shook her head and said, "My chest hurt very much, I can't eat."

Ying Gu sneered, "I have medicine to stop the pain, yet you were terribly suspicious."

Huang Rong ignored her, "Jing Gege," she said, "Take a Nine Flowered Jade Dew Pill and give it to me." These were the pills given by Lu Chengfeng at the Cloud Village the other day. Huang Rong always carried them around in her pocket. When Hong Qigong and Guo Jing were injured by Ouyang Feng, they took some of these pills. Although the pills could not heal their injuries, but they could stop the pain and refresh their spirits. Guo Jing complied and untied her pouch, taking a pill out.

When Huang Rong mentioned the 'Nine Flowered Jade Dew Pill', suddenly Ying Gu's body slightly shook; afterwards she saw the red pill, she sternly said, "Is that the Nine Flowered Jade Dew Pill? Let me take a look."

Guo Jing thought the way she spoke was really strange, unconsciously he lifted his head to stare at her. He saw a

glint of fierceness in her eyes, he felt even more strange; but he gave the pouch of pills to her nonetheless.

Ying Gu took the pills and brought them up to her nose. A whiff of fragrance attacked her nostrils, giving them a cool feeling. She looked at Guo Jing with penetrating gaze and asked, "This is the Peach Blossom Island's special medicine. Where did you get it? Tell me, tell me!" Her last sentence carried an extremely fierce tone.

Huang Rong's heart was moved, "This lady learned 'qi men wu xing' [mysterious gate five path]; is she related to one of my father's disciples?" She heard Guo Jing replied, "She is the daughter of the Peach Blossom Island's Master."

Ying Gu jumped up in shock, "She is the Old Heretic Huang's daughter?" Her eyes shone brightly, one arm extended, the other pulled back, as if she was about to strike.

"Jing Gege, give those three pouches back to her!" Huang Rong said, "She is my father's enemy, we don't need her pity."

Guo Jing took out the pouches, but he hesitated to hand them over. Huang Rong said, "Jing Gege, Just put them down! I may not necessarily die. Even if I die, so what?"

Guo Jing had never disobeyed Huang Rong from the start; he put down the pouches on the table with tears streaming down his cheeks.

Ying Gu was looking outside the window, muttering, "Heaven, oh Heaven!" Suddenly she walked to the other room. Her back was facing them, so they did not know what she was doing.

“Let us go,” Huang Rong said, “I am sick of seeing this woman.”

Before Guo Jing could answer, Ying Gu walked in and said, “I diligently studied mathematics because I want to enter the Peach Blossom Island. But judging from the Old Heretic Huang’s daughter, even if I study for another hundred years it will still be useless. It was fate. What more can I say? Just go. Take away these pouches.” While saying it she pushed the Nine Flowered Jade Dew Pill pouch and the three pouches she made into Guo Jing’s hand. To Huang Rong she said, “These Nine Flowered Jade Dew Pills are harmful to your injury. Don’t take it no matter what. After you are healed, don’t forget your promise to stay with me for a year. Your father had destroyed my life; I’d rather give all these food to the dogs than to let you eat them.” She threw the porridge, chicken and fish out the window.

Huang Rong was seething with anger; she wanted to answer back sarcastically, but then she changed her mind. She held Guo Jing’s hand and stood up, then with her bamboo stick she wrote three mathematics problems on the ground:

The first one included the ‘ri, yue, shui, huo, mu, jin, tu’ [sun, moon, water, fire, wood, metal and earth] collection of the ‘qi yao jiu zhi tian zhu bi suan’ [seven dazzling nine grasping Indian method of calculation].

The second one was ‘li fang zhao bing zhi yin gei mi ti’ [lit. ‘standing up soldier supplying silver’ topic]. [**Author’s note:** This is the vertical theory of numbers in western mathematics].

The third one was ‘gui gu suan ti’ [ghost valley mathematic problem]: “There is an unknown number; three and three has two as the remainder, five and five has three as the

remainder, seven and seven has two as the remainder, what mathematical operand is that?" [**Author's note:** this problem belongs to the theory of numbers of higher mathematics; our Song Dynasty scholars have been quite profound in this kind of study.]

After writing these three problems, Huang Rong slowly walked out, holding on Guo Jing's arm. As he stepped over the door, Guo Jing turned his head around and saw Ying Gu's hand grasping her computing device, her eyes fixed to the ground like she was entranced. As soon as they were outside Guo Jing carried Huang Rong on his back, still following Huang Rong's direction, walking step by step out of the marsh. Guo Jing was afraid he might miscount his steps, so he did not dare to say anything; but as soon as they left the forest he asked, "Rong'er, what did you write on the sand?"

Huang Rong smiled, "I gave three mathematical problems to her. Humph, I doubt it if she will be able to solve them in half a year. Let all her gray hair turn white. Who told her to be so rude?"

"What enmity does she have toward your father?" Guo Jing asked.

"I have never heard Father mentioned it," Huang Rong replied. After being silent for about half a day she suddenly said, "She must be very beautiful when she was young. Jing Gege, don't you agree?" Actually she bore a suspicion in her heart, "Is it possible that in the former days my father and she were lovers? Humph, most likely she wanted my father to marry her but my father did not want her."

Guo Jing replied, "Doesn't matter if she was beautiful or not; even if she cannot solve your problems she still won't be able to chase us and take the pouches back."



"I wonder what's inside those pouches. I doubt it if she had our well-beings in her mind. Let's open them and take a look," Huang Rong said.

"No, no!" Guo Jing hastily said, "We must follow her instructions, we must not open it until we arrive at Taoyuan."

Huang Rong was very curious; she persuaded Guo Jing to open it, but Guo Jing firmly refused; finally Huang Rong resigned.

After being busy the whole night finally the sky turned brighter. Guo Jing leaped up a tree to take a good look around; he was relieved not to see any trail of the Iron Palm Clan disciples. He whistled loudly several times, and the little red horse came galloping fast. Not too long afterwards his pair of eagles was also seen flying above their heads.

Two people were just mounting the horse when suddenly they heard shouts coming out of the forest. Dozens of Iron Palm Clan disciples came rushing forward. They have been guarding around the forest for half a night. As soon as they heard Guo Jing's whistle they came out to catch them. Luckily Qiu Qianren was not among these people. Guo Jing called out, "You missed!" He squeezed his legs on the horse's belly and the little red horse ran like the wind; in a moment they could not see their pursuers anymore.

By noon that day the little red horse had run for more than a hundred 'li's; they stopped by a small restaurant by the roadside. Huang Rong's chest was still hurting, but she managed to drink half a bowl of rice soup. Guo Jing asked around and found out that they had arrived within Taoyuan County border. Quickly he took the white pouch and cut the thread. Inside he found a map with two lines of characters which read, "Follow the route shown on the map. At the end

of the road you will find a waterfall with a thatched hut next to it. Open the red pouch when you arrive there.” Guo Jing did not tarry any longer; they remounted the horse and galloped away.

After traveling for about seventy, eighty ‘li’s, the road was getting narrower. Eight, nine ‘li’s later they entered a narrow passageway with mountain walls on both sides. Soon the pathway turned into a winding alley so narrow that one person could barely squeeze through. They were compelled to leave little red horse to graze by itself on the side of the hill. Guo Jing took Huang Rong and carried her on his back; together they entered the alley. Following the steep mountain pathway they walked for about two hours. Sometimes the alley was so narrow that Guo Jing had to lift Huang Rong up and he walked sideways, squeezing in between the mountain walls.

It was already the seventh month, the weather was scorching hot and it felt like the heat would be enough to melt metal. Fortunately there were skyscraping mountain peaks around them cooling down their path.

A moment later Guo Jing was hungry; he took some dried buns from his pocket and tore several pieces to feed Huang Rong. He did not stop walking however; he was eating while walking forward. After eating three buns he was thirsty. Suddenly he heard from a distant a faint sound of a waterfall. His spirit arose and he sped up his steps.

In the quietness of the mountain, that waterfall echoed in the valley, creating a loud rumbling noise like a torrential flood. The closer he got, the louder the noise became. When he reached the top of the hill he saw a big waterfall like a white dragon coming out from in between a pair of peaks opposite the hill where he was standing, falling down to a big pond below with astonishing force.

From the top of the hill Guo Jing looked down and saw a thatched hut next to the waterfall. Guo Jing sat on a piece of rock and took the red pouch from his pocket. Inside was a piece of paper with these words: 'The injury this girl suffers can only be healed by Emperor Duan ...'

Seeing those three characters 'Duan huang ye' [Emperor Duan] Guo Jing was startled, "Emperor Duan, isn't he the Southern Emperor who share the same fame as your father?" he asked.

Huang Rong was exhausted, but hearing him mentioned the Southern Emperor her heart was stirred. "Emperor Duan?" she said, "Shifu also said that his injury can only be healed by Emperor Duan. I heard my father mentioned Emperor Duan is the emperor of Dali in Yunnan. Isn't that ...". Suddenly she remembered that this place was separated with Yunnan by 'ten thousand rivers and a thousand mountains' [wan shui qian shan - meaning 'the trails and tribulations of a long journey']. It was impossible to reach in three days. Suddenly her chest felt cold. She made an effort to sit down and leaning on Guo Jing they read the paper together.

'The injury this girl suffers can only be healed by Emperor Duan. Because many of his conducts were not righteous he hid himself in Taoyuan and made it very difficult for outsiders to see him. Anyone seeking medical help is a taboo to him; if you mention your intention, before you reach his residence you will be stopped by the vicious hands of a fisherman, a woodcutter, a farmer and a scholar. Therefore, you must say that you have an important message from your master Hong Qigong and want to have an audience with the Emperor. Once you are in the presence of the Southern Emperor, give him the yellow pouch. Your fate depends on this.'

Finished reading Guo Jing turned his head to Huang Rong only to see her frowning silently. "Rong'er," he asked, "Why did Emperor Duan do many unrighteous conducts? Why is it seeking medical help is a taboo to him? What are the vicious hands of a fisherman, a woodcutter, a farmer and a scholar?"

Huang Rong sighed, "Jing Gege, please don't think that I am so smart that I know everything."

Guo Jing was taken aback; he held out his arms and gave Huang Rong a hug. "Very well, let us go down," he said. Casting his glance to the distant he could see there was a man sitting under the willow tree next to the waterfall. That man was wearing a bamboo hat, but because the distance was quite far he could not see clearly what that man was doing.

First, he was in a hurry, second, the pathway down was a lot easier, therefore, without needing to much time Guo Jing with Huang Rong on his back quickly arrived by the waterfall. He saw that man was wearing a raincoat, sitting on a piece of rock, fishing.

The falling water created a strong rapids, the water flowed too fast, how could there be any fish? Even if there was, how could the fish have time to take the bait?

Guo Jing saw that man was about forty years old, his face was black like the bottom of a pot, full with beards and whiskers sprouting out like wire brush. His eyes stared motionless toward the water. Seeing he was fishing with a full concentration Guo Jing did not dare to disturb, he put Huang Rong down by the willow tree to rest, while they waited to see what kind of fish live in that waterfall.

After waiting for a long time suddenly a golden streak of light came flashing out of the water; that fisherman's face

showed delight, his fishing pole was bent downward. They saw something about a foot long biting the fishing line. That something did not look like either a fish or a snake, it looked so strange.

Guo Jing was astounded, he could not restrain from calling out, "Ah! What is that?"

By that time another golden streak jumped up the water to bite the fishing line. That fisherman was delighted, he kept the fishing pole steady. But the pole was bent more and more. The fisherman struggled to keep it straight. 'Crack!' suddenly the pole broke. Two strange fish let the fishing line go, then swam away complacently. The water current was very strong but it seemed like those fish were swimming in a still water. In an instant they disappeared under a rock.

The fisherman turned around with eyes bulging, glaring angrily, shouted loudly, "Stinky kid, your old man has waited painstakingly for half a day, and then you little thief came and scared them away." His hands stretched out with palms open wide, moved forward two steps ready to pounce. But for an unknown reason he managed to control his temper and held his big hands; his finger joints made cracking sounds; his face was full of anger.

Guo Jing realized he had inadvertently caused trouble therefore he did not dare to talk back. "Uncle is angry, that was my fault. But what kind of strange fish are they?" he humbly asked.

That fisherman scolded him, "Are you blind? Those are not fish, those are 'jin wawa' [golden baby or baby doll]."

Guo Jing was not angry even though scolded; he smiled and asked further, "Please forgive my ignorance, but what is a 'jin wawa'?"

That fisherman flew into a rage, he shouted, "'Jin wawa' is 'jin wawa', why do you stinky little thief want to know anyway?"

Because Guo Jing earnestly wanted to ask him to show the way to see Emperor Duan, he did not dare to say anything, he simply raised his cupped fists to apologize.

Huang Rong could not hold her patience much longer, she interrupted, "'Jin wawa' is a golden colored giant salamander. We raise several pairs of them in my home. What's so strange about it?"

Listening to Huang Rong correctly explained what a 'jin wawa' really was, the fisherman was slightly confounded, he scolded, "Humph, you are blowing your horn very loud! Raising several pairs of them! Let me ask you, what's the purpose of a 'jin wawa'?"

"What's the purpose?" Huang Rong asked, "They are attractive, can make a 'ya ya ya' noise like a little baby, so we raise them to play with them."

Hearing her saying the right thing, that fisherman's face softened, he said, "Little baby girl, if you raise several pairs in your house, then you must give me a pair to compensate my loss."

"Why must I compensate you?" Huang Rong asked.

The fisherman pointed to Guo Jing and said, "I happened to catch one with my fishing pole, but he came and rudely shouted, so the other one appeared and pull apart my fishing pole. This 'jin wawa' is very smart; once it escaped danger, don't ever think of catching it for the second time. If I don't ask you to compensate me, whom should I ask?"

Huang Rong smiled, "Even if you did catch it, you only caught one. Try as you might, but how could the second one be willing to take your bait?"

The fisherman could not find any word to answer this; he scratched his head and said, "All right then, just give me one."

"If you separate a pair of 'jin wawa', within three days both of them, the male and the female, will die," Huang Rong said.

That fisherman did not have any doubt anymore; he cupped his fists and bowed respectfully to Guo Jing and Huang Rong, "All right, just consider it my fault," he said, "Would you share a pair with me?"

Huang Rong smiled. "Tell me first, what are you going to do with 'jin wawa'?" she asked.

The fisherman hesitated a little bit, then explained, "All right, I'll tell you. My martial uncle is an Indian. He had come to visit my master these past few days. On the way here he managed to catch a pair of 'jin wawa'; he was very happy. He said there was an extremely poisonous insect harming a lot of people in India. There was no way of exterminating this insect. This 'jin wawa' is actually the insect's adversary. He asked me to take care of them for a few days, and then hand them back to him by the time he is done talking to my master and is ready to go down the mountain. He is going to take them back to India and breed them. Who would have thought ..."

"Who would have thought you were not careful and let the 'jin wawa's run away into this waterfall," Huang Rong cut him off.

That fisherman was startled, "Ah! How did you know?" he asked.

Huang Rong pouted her little mouth and said, "Is that so difficult to guess? This 'jin wawa' is really not easy to keep. Originally we have five pairs, later on two pairs ran away."

The fisherman's eyes gleamed, his face showed a happy expression. "Good Miss, please give me a pair. You will still have two pairs. Or else my martial uncle will be mad at me; I may not be able to take it," he begged.

Huang Rong laughed. "It's not difficult to give you a pair, but why were you so vicious to us earlier?" she asked.

That fisherman smiled awkwardly, he sheepishly said, "Ay! My bad temper; I really have to change. Good Miss, where is your mansion? Is it alright if I follow you? Is it far from here?"

Huang Rong gently let out a deep breath and said, "If you say it's near, it is not; but if you say it is far, it isn't either. Maybe about three, four thousand 'li's from here."

That fisherman was startled, his brush-wire whiskers stood up, he roared, "Little girl, you are swindling me!" His vinegar-bowl sized fist raised up, ready to smash Huang Rong's head; but realizing she was only a young and feeble girl, he was afraid he might kill her. His fist stayed midair then slowly dropped down to his side.

Guo Jing was ready, as soon as that fisherman strikes, he would block the attack immediately. Huang Rong smiled and said, "Why worry? I have already had a good idea from the start. Jing Gege, please call the white eagles."

Guo Jing was not clear of her intention, but he whistled to call the eagles anyway. That fisherman was secretly



surprised; Guo Jing's whistle echoed throughout the valleys and mountains, supported by a profound internal energy. "Luckily I did not fight with him earlier," he thought, "Otherwise this little kid will beat me to death."

Not too long afterwards, the pair of eagles came flying by, following the whistle sound. Huang Rong peeled a piece of tree bark, and then carved a line of characters with a needle, 'Father, I want a pair of 'jin wawa'. Let the eagles carry them back here. Your daughter Rong pays respect.'

Guo Jing was delighted; he cut two pieces of cloth from his belt and firmly tied the bark on the male eagle's foot. "Go to the Peach Blossom Island, quickly go and quickly come back," Huang Rong told the pair of eagles.

Guo Jing was afraid the eagles did not understand, he pointed to the east and said three times, "Peach Blossom Island." The pair of eagles let out a long cry, lifted up their wings and soared away. They made a circle in the air, headed east and then disappeared behind the clouds in a short moment.

The fisherman's jaw dropped and stayed open for a while; he muttered, "Peach Blossom Island, Peach Blossom Island? What is Huang Yaoshi, Venerable Huang to you?"

"He is my father, why?" Huang Rong proudly said.

"Ah!" that fisherman exclaimed; he was at a loss of words.

Huang Rong said, "My white eagles will bring the 'jin wawa' here in a few days; it won't be too late, will it?"

"I hope not," the fisherman said. He looked up and down Jing and Rong two people to size them up with eyes full of suspicions.

Guo Jing bowed and asked, "We haven't found out Uncle's honorable name."

The fisherman did not answer, instead he asked questions, "What are you doing here? Who told you to come here?"

Guo Jing respectfully answered, "Junior has come to seek an audience with Emperor Duan." Initially he wanted to say as Ying Gu had directed them to say, that Hong Qigong had sent them to come; but he was not able to lie, eventually he did not say anything.

"My Shifu does not see outsiders," that fisherman sternly said, "What do you want from him?"

By Guo Jing's natural disposition, he wanted to speak the truth, but he was afraid they would not be able to see the Southern Emperor, and thus jeopardizing Huang Rong's life. He could not say the truth, yet he did not have the power to lie; so he hesitated before answering the question.

The fisherman noticed his indeterminate expression, also Huang Rong's thin and pale countenance; he had guessed 70, 80% correctly. "You want my Shifu to heal your injury, don't you?" he roared.

Guo Jing felt like a heavy load was taken from his mind, he had nothing to hide any longer. He had no other choice but nodded his head, but his heart was filled with anxiety and regret, he hated himself for not being able to tell a lie.

The fisherman was almost shouting, "Don't ever think of seeing my Shifu. Even if I have to bear my Shifu and Shishu's [martial uncle] scolding, I don't want your 'jin wawa' or 'yin wawa' [silver baby] anymore. Just go down the mountain, quick!"

His words without any doubt did not give them the slightest amount of leniency. Guo Jing was silent for half a day, sucking in cold air. After a moment he stepped forward and bowed respectfully. "The injured is the Huang Daozhu [Island Master Huang] of Peach Blossom Island's daughter. Currently she is also the Bangzhu of the Beggar Clan. I am asking Uncle to consider Island Master Huang and Hong Bangzhu's golden faces and show us the way so that we can seek an audience with the Emperor Duan."

Hearing the three characters 'Hong Bangzhu', the fisherman's countenance softened; he shook his head and said, "This young miss is the Beggar Clan's Bangzhu? I don't believe it."

Guo Jing pointed his finger to the bamboo stick in Huang Rong's hand, he said, "This is the Beggar Clan Leader's Dog-beating Stick; certainly Uncle recognize it."

The fisherman nodded. "What is the Nine-fingered Divine Beggar to you, then?" he asked.

"He is our Benevolent Master," Guo Jing replied.

"Ah!" the fisherman exclaimed, "Is that so? Are coming to see my Shifu on the Nine-fingered Divine Beggar's instruction?"

Guo Jing hesitated before answering, Huang Rong quickly answered, "Certainly."

The fisherman lowered his head in doubt, he thought, "The Nine-fingered Divine Beggar has an extraordinary friendship with my Shifu. How should I handle this matter?"

Huang Rong understood his hesitation, she wanted to take advantage of this opportunity; she said, "Our Shifu sent us here to seek an audience with Emperor Duan, other than to

ask him to treat injury, also to respectfully inform him on a very important matter.”

The fisherman suddenly raised his head up, with eyes blazing like a thunderbolt he fixed his gaze on Huang Rong and sternly asked, “The Nine-fingered Divine Beggar told you to seek audience with Emperor Duan?”

“That’s right!” Huang Rong said.

“Did he really say ‘Emperor Duan’ and not some other name?” the fisherman pressed.

Huang Rong knew there must be something in the way he said that name, but she could not correct herself; she had no choice but nodded her head in affirmative.

The fisherman moved two steps forward and with a loud voice shouted, “Emperor Duan has been no longer in this world for a while now!”

Jing, Rong, two people were shocked; with a shaking voice they asked, “He died?”

The fisherman said, “When Emperor Duan was leaving this world, the Senior Nine-fingered Divine Beggar was by his side. How could he tell you to visit Emperor Duan? Who told you to come here? What kind of evil scheme are you playing? Quickly tell me.” While still speaking he took a big step, his left hand brushed away, his right hand stretched horizontally to grab Huang Rong’s shoulder.

Guo Jing had guarded from the start against the possibility that he would resort to violence. As soon as his right hand was within a foot from Huang Rong’s body, Guo Jing’s left palm made a circle, his right palm went straight forward, in the ‘jian long zai tian’ [Seeing Dragon in the Field] posture, blocking in front of Huang Rong’s body.

This move was a purely defensive in nature, like a strong invisible wall was suddenly appeared in between Huang Rong and the fisherman. The fisherman saw that although Guo Jing sent out his palm, but he was leaning to one side, hence he did not actually attack him; he was slightly surprised, but his hand continued to grab Huang Rong's shoulder. When his hand was about half a foot apart from his target, Guo Jing's palm met his, and he felt a shot of pain on his arm, flowing up to his chest, like his attacking force rebounded and attacked his own body. He was afraid Guo Jing would take advantage of this unfavorable situation and launched another attack; he hurriedly leaped back with arm horizontally situated in front of his chest. "I heard it when Hong Qigong discussed martial art with Shifu; this is precisely his '18-Dragon Subduing Palms'. Then these two youngsters are truly his disciples; they were not lying," he thought.

He saw Guo Jing cupped his fists across his chest with modesty and respect; even though Guo Jing had gained the upper hand, yet his expression did not show the least bit of self-complacency, making a good impression on the heart of the fisherman. He said, "Although you two are really the Senior Nine-fingered Divine Beggar's disciples, but he was not the one who sent you here, was he?"

Guo Jing did not know how he could guess correctly, but since their lie had been uncovered, he was unable to deny and was compelled to nod his head. The fisherman's face was not as fierce and full of enmity as before. "Even if the injured were the Nine-fingered Divine Beggar himself, Xiao Ge [lit. little 'elder brother', he was referring to himself] still cannot take the Senior to go up the mountain and see my Shifu. I beg for your forgiveness."

"Even if my Shifu is here you still cannot take him up?" Huang Rong asked.

The fisherman shook his head, "I can't! Even if you kill me I still can't!" he said.

In her heart Huang Rong was thinking over, "He clearly admitted that Emperor Duan is his Shifu; but he also said that Emperor Duan has already died, and that Benevolent Master Hong was by his side when he died. There are too many strange things here, but this man is really difficult to talk to." She thought further, "His Shifu is on this mountain, for that I am certain; whether he is Emperor Duan or not, we have to go up and see him." She lifted her eyes to see the mountain was so high that its peak disappeared into the cloud above; it was higher than the Iron Palm's Middle Finger Peak, the mountain rocks looked slippery, not even a blade of grass grew. It looked like the waterfall was coming out of nowhere. There was no visible path going up the mountain. She thought, "Li Bai [a famous poet from the Tang Dynasty] said the water of Huang He [Yellow River] went up to the sky; this water truly comes from the sky."

Following the waterfall her gaze moved down; her mind was still churning a way to climb up the mountain, suddenly her eyes caught a golden light glittering under the water, something was moving in the water. Slowly she walked to the side of the waterfall to see more clearly. Turned out it was the pair of 'jin wawa' beneath a rock, their tails were swaying back and forth outside. Quickly she beckoned Guo Jing to come over and see.

"Ah!" Guo Jing exclaimed, "Let me go down to catch them," he said.

"No! Don't!" Huang Rong said, "The current is too strong, how can you set your feet down? Don't be so foolish."

But Guo Jing thought, "If I take the risk to catch these two strange fish for the fisherman, maybe his heart will be

moved and he will take us to see his master. Otherwise, will I have to see Huang Rong suffer from her injury helplessly without anybody to heal her?" He knew Huang Rong would stop him, therefore, without saying anything, without even took out his shoes or socks, he jumped into the waterfall below.

"Jing Gege!" Huang Rong anxiously called. She stood up and tried to rush forward, but her legs were feeble, she was staggering.

The fisherman was also stunned, he extended his hand to hold Huang Rong; then immediately rushed toward the thatched hut. It looked like he was going to fetch something to rescue Guo Jing.

Huang Rong sat back on a rock to watch Guo Jing. She saw he was standing steadily in the water; the waterfall flushed on him crazily, attacked him fiercely, but surprisingly his body did not falter at all. Slowly bending his waist he grabbed the 'jin wawa'. With each hand holding the 'jin wawa's tail, he gently pulled them out. He was afraid to injure the strange fish, hence he did not use too much strength; who would have thought that the 'jin wawa's body was really slippery. By wriggling their tails they managed to get loose from Guo Jing's grab and sneaked back under the rock. Guo Jing quickly reached out, but he was still a little bit slow; in an instant the fish disappeared without any trace.

Huang Rong cried out in dismay, suddenly she heard somebody called out in alarm behind her back. She turned around and saw the fisherman stood behind her. There was a shiny black small boat on his left shoulder and two iron oars in his left hand; obviously he was ready to rescue Guo Jing.

Guo Jing sent his strength to his feet, with 'qian jin zhui' [thousand-catty fall] he stood firm on a rock, steady as a pillar. He held his breath and reached down to the rock under which the strange fish escaped, trying to lift it up. To his delight the rock slightly moved. Using the 'dragon fly to the sky' from the 18-Dragon Subduing Palms his hands jerked the rock up; with a loud splash that huge rock was unexpectedly lifted up.

Guo Jing moved wonderfully fast; with the 'qian long wu yong' [hidden dragon is useless(?)] he shoved the rock horizontally. The rock was hit both by his palm and the waterfall; it fell down next to his body, with a rumbling and gurgling noise it disappeared into the deep abyss below. The noise echoed throughout the valley for a long time. Guo Jing lifted high his arms with a 'jin wawa' in each hand; step by step he came out of the waterfall.

Day and night the water fell down, with the passage of time it had created a gully some two 'zhang's [1 zhang is approximately 10 feet or 3 meters] deep. The fisherman saw Guo Jing was standing at the bottom of this gully; how could he jump up? Hence he held out his oar for Guo Jing to grab, then he would lift it up. But Guo Jing hands were full with a pair of strange fish, he was afraid if he loosened up his grip the fish would slip away. Gathering his strength his right foot pushed the bottom, followed by his left foot kicking the edge of the gully; he managed to borrow the strength to leap up ashore.

Even though they have been together for a while, Huang Rong did not expect his skill had improved this much. She was pleased and amazed at the same time to watch him standing firm under water, lifting up the rock, grabbing the fish, and leaping up from underneath the strong force of the waterfall like it was nothing.



Actually, in order to save Huang Rong Guo Jing did not think about how he recklessly braved the danger, but as he was ashore he turned his head to see the rushing water splashing everywhere, he could not help but feel dizzy and scared. He could not believe he had this kind of guts to go underwater.

The fisherman admired him endlessly; he knew that if Guo Jing's internal energy, lightness kungfu and external strength were less than excellent not only he would not be able to catch the fish, but he would certainly drowned into the deep abyss underneath the fall.

The two 'jin wawa's struggled in Guo Jing's hands with their 'wah wah' calls, just like a baby's cry. Guo Jing laughed, "No wonder they are called 'wawa' fish, they sounded just like a baby crying." He held out his hands to give the fish to the fisherman.

The fisherman's face bore a delightful expression, he dropped his oars and held out his hand to receive the fish when suddenly he remembered something. He withdrew his hand and said, "Just throw them back into the water, I can't take them."

"Why?" Guo Jing wondered.

"Even if I receive your 'jin wawa' I still can't take you up to see my Shifu," the fisherman said, "Receiving a favor and did not pay it back; won't I be the laughingstock of the world's heroes?"

Guo Jing was startled, with a solemn face he said, "Uncle cannot take us up, you must have your own difficulty, how could Junior force our will? But this pair of fish is such a trivial matter, who said anything about favor? Uncle does not need to think about it, please take them." While saying it he shoved the fish into the fisherman's hand.

The fisherman finally took the fish, his face looked awkward. Guo Jing turned to Huang Rong and said, "Rong'er, as the saying goes, life and death is in the fate's hand, a long life is difficult to predict; even if your injury is incurable, on the cloudy road of life you will always have your Jing Gege to keep you company. Let us go!"

Listening to Guo Jing revealing his true feeling Huang Rong's eyes turned red; but she still had something in her heart. She turned to the fisherman and said, "Uncle, you are not willing to lead us up, that's all right. But there is something I don't understand. If you don't tell me, then I will die unsatisfied."

"What is that?" the fisherman asked.

"This mountain peak is smooth as a mirror," Huang Rong said, "There is no pathway to the top. Even if you are willing to take us up, how would you do that?"

The fisherman thought, "If I don't take them up, there is no way they can go up the mountain by themselves. I guess it won't do any harm to tell them." Thereupon he said, "If you think it's difficult, then it is, but if you say it's easy, it really is very easy. Just around that horn-shaped hill on the right there is no waterfall, the current is not as strong. I can sit on this iron boat and paddle against the flow. One time up I can take somebody with me, the second time up I can take two people."

"Ah!" Huang Rong exclaimed, "That's how it is. Farewell now!" She stood up and leaning on Guo Jing for support she turned around and left. Guo Jing cupped his fists across his chest but did not say anything.

The fisherman saw they were walking down the mountain, he was afraid the 'jin wawa' would escape, he dashed toward the thatched hut to put them away for safekeeping.

“Quick! Grab the iron boat and the oars and go to that horn-shaped peak,” Huang Rong said,

Guo Jing was stunned. “This ... isn’t this inappropriate?” he stammered.

“Fine! You want to be a gentleman, then be a gentleman!” Huang Rong said.

“Which is more important? Saving Rong’er’s life or be a gentleman?” This thought flashed through Guo Jing’s mind several times; it was hard for him to decide. But then he saw Huang Rong had started walking quickly to the peak; he did not have time to contemplate much longer. He heaved the iron boat up and hastily went to the peak. With a loud shout, “Up!” he tossed the boat onto upstream of the waterfall. Once the boat was out of his hands he grabbed the iron oars and held them underneath his left armpit, while with his right hand he embraced Huang Rong.

By that time the iron boat had been floating downstream, carried by the current. Suddenly he heard a sound of secret projectile behind his head; immediately he ducked and let the secret projectile flew over his head. He leaped forward and in an instant both of them landed inside the boat. A secret projectile hit Huang Rong’s back, fortunately it hit the soft hedgehog armor inside the sack on her back. Amidst the rumbling noise of the water they heard the fisherman’s loud roar, but they could not hear clearly what he was saying.

Very soon the boat was on the verge of the waterfall. If they fell over the edge in this fast flowing waterfall their bodies would certainly shattered to dust. Guo Jing’s left hand grabbed the iron oar and hastily rowed with all his might; the boat moved upstream a few feet. His right hand

released Huang Rong and grabbed the other oar and pulled; again the boat moved a few feet forward.

The fisherman stood by the bank, pointing his two fingers, angrily cursing and scolding. Amidst the wind and the water noises they could hear some 'stinky girl' and 'lowly scoundrel' words. Huang Rong giggled and said, "He still thinks you are the good man. He is only cursing me."

All Guo Jing's attention was focused on rowing the boat; he did not hear what she said. His arms frantically paddled the boat against the flow; the iron boat's keel was slowly cutting the wave. The current on that place was not as strong as the waterfall, but it was strong and rapid enough to make Guo Jing's face turned red from exerting his strength. Several times he was almost pushed back downstream.

A moment later they arrived at the part where the current was slightly slower; by that time Guo Jing had started to understand how to handle the oars. Using the mutual hands combat technique he launched the 'divine dragon swings its tail' successively. Each paddling movement was supported by the 18-Dragon Subduing Palms' strength; his palm strength was transmitted to the end of the oar. The left hand paddled with 'divine dragon swings its tail', followed by the right hand with 'divine dragon swings its tail', the iron boat slowly moving upstream through a winding river ways.

"Even with that fisherman paddling, the boat would not necessarily move faster than this," Huang Rong complimented.

A short moment later there was sandy beach on either side of the river; and after turning a bend, the scenery was picturesque: the clear brook softly murmured, the river

flowed very smoothly, on some parts it even looked like a still water. The river was only about a 'zhang' wide, with weeping willow trees on either side, their leaves brushing the water. Just behind the green willow trees they could see countless peach trees. It must be very beautiful in the spring time when the peach trees were in full bloom. Currently there was not a single peach blossom in sight, but the river banks were full of clusters of white florets, the air was thick with their fragrance.

Guo Jing and Huang Rong both were very relaxed; they had never expected that in this high mountain peak there was a whole different world. The water was deep green like a jade, so deep that they could not see the bottom. Guo Jing lowered the iron oar, trying to gauge the river's depth; but he was startled since the oar was almost slipped from his grip. Turned out while on the surface the water was smooth like a mirror, there was a strong current flowing deep below the surface.

The iron boat slowly moved forward; birds were flying and chirping among the green willow leaves. Huang Rong sighed, "If my injury is incurable, I'd like to be buried here; I don't want to go back down again," she said.

Guo Jing was about to say some encouraging words when the iron boat suddenly entered a tunnel. Inside the tunnel the fragrance was very thick while the water flowed faster; they heard some loud noise ahead. "What's that?" Guo Jing asked.

Huang Rong shook her head, "I don't know."

Very soon they saw a light, the iron boat had come out of the tunnel; two people could not help to gasp, "Beautiful!"

Outside the tunnel they saw an enormous fountain, perhaps its height reached two 'zhang's. The white bubbles and

jade-green streams formed a giant water column spurting straight up to the sky from the middle of a rock. The noise they heard came from this fountain. The creek stopped here; turned out this fountain was the spring from which the river and the waterfall originated.

Guo Jing helped Huang Rong came ashore. He pulled the iron boat up a rock and turned his head around. He saw the sun light shone through the water column, created a dazzlingly beautiful rainbow. The scenery was out-of-this-world; even if they had hundreds praises, they would not be able to find one that is suitable to describe what they saw. All they could do was holding each other's hand and sat side by side on a rock; their heart was bright and clean, with nothing to worry.

After enjoying this scenery for half a day, they suddenly heard a sound of singing coming from behind the rainbow. The tune was 'shan po yang' [hillside sheep]:

"Cities and towns turned bad, where are the heroes? Can the dragon in the cloud explain? Thinking about prosperity and decline, constricting the chest. Tang Dynasty arose Sui Dynasty declined, the way of the world is like an ever changing cloud. Quick, is the heaven and earth's fault; slow, also is the heaven and earth's fault!"

The 'hillside sheep' was a popular song from the end of the Song Dynasty, everybody everywhere could sing the song. The tune was only one, but the lyrics could be changed as the singer wished, so unavoidably there are hundreds of thousands variations out there, only most of them were rustic and vulgar.

Huang Rong noticed that this song was lamenting the rise and decline of human race, carrying a profound meaning; she secretly applauded the singer. She saw the singer came

out from behind the rainbow; his left hand carried a bundle of firewood, while his right hand holding an axe; turned out he was a woodcutter.

Huang Rong recalled Ying Gu's note that read, 'Anyone seeking medical help is a taboo to him, if you mention your intention, before you reach his residence you will be stopped by the vicious hands of a fisherman, a woodcutter, a farmer and a scholar.' At that time she was not clear what 'a fisherman, a woodcutter, a farmer and a scholar' meant, but now she realized the man catching 'jin wawa' was the fisherman, and now she saw the woodcutter. Then the fisherman, the woodcutter, the farmer and the scholar must be Emperor Duan's disciples or trusted aides. She could not help feeling anxious, "It was really not easy to go through that fisherman. This woodcutter's song was not vulgar, looks like he is not easy to deal with. I wonder what kind of people are the farmer and the scholar?"

In the meantime the woodcutter continues to sing, "On the Tianjin bridge, leaning against the railing looking afar, the air of the royalty has withered and fallen. Amidst the dark green trees and the vast water, from the cloud platform the resurgence is nowhere to be seen. From eternity, in a cycle of life, everything perished. Merit, won't last forever! Name, also won't last forever!"

He slowly walked near and looked toward Jing and Rong, two people's direction; but it was as if he did not see them, he simply drew his axe and started chopping wood on the hillside.

Huang Rong noticed this man's face was grand and heroic, his appearance like that of a tiger's. The way he lifted his hand or took a step carried an impressive power like that of an army general. If he wasn't wearing coarse clothes and chopping woods in this secluded mountain, he surely gave

an impression as the general who is in charge of a large army. Huang Rong's heart was stirred, "Shifu said that the Southern Emperor, Emperor Duan is actually an emperor of Dali in Yunnan; could it be that this woodcutter was actually his general? Only why did his song carry a desperate and mournful sentiment?" she thought.

The woodcutter continued singing, "Mountain peaks stand as if they are gathered together, the billows roll as if they were angry. The mountains and rivers in and around the road to Tongguan; looking to the west, hearts full of doubts. Grieving Qin and Han dynasties, their palaces have turned into dust. Flourished, common people suffered; perished, common people suffered!"

Listening the last two lines, Huang Rong remembered her father often said, 'What is emperor or general? All are criminals harming common people. Toppling dynasty, changing surname; in the end the common people suffered!' She was unable to restrain from shouting her praise, "Good song!"

The woodcutter turned his head, inserting the axe back to his waist he asked, "Good? What's good about it?"

Huang Rong was about to answer, but then she thought, "He loves to sing, why don't I sing the 'hillside sheep' to answer him?" Thereupon she smiled slightly, lowered her head and sang, "Green mountains waiting for each other, white clouds love each other; not even dreaming of purple robe and golden belt. One thatched hut among the blooming wild flower; why worry over who flourished and who perished? Sufficient is a humble pathway and a single ladle. Poor, spirit does not change; success, the will does not change!"



She had concluded that this woodcutter must be the general who followed the Southern Emperor to this secluded place; formerly he must be in charge of the whole army, one who once held a prominent place in the kingdom. Accordingly the song she sang was a praise to his merit and name, to the one who lived contentedly in a wild mountain forest. Actually, even though she was witty and intelligent, by all means she was not a scholar who in a short time was able to compose a good song like the one she had just sung. When she was on the Peach Blossom Island she heard her father sang this song; only she changed several characters to emphasis this woodcutter's former days of riches and honor and place great importance on his meritorious achievements. It was a pity she was suffering an injury that her internal energy was not as strong and her voice was rather weak. As the saying goes, 'qian chuan wan chuan, ma pi bu chuan!' [lit. thousand times bore through, ten thousand times bore through; horse's fart does not bore through - meaning "Anything gets through me except horse fart" (Courtesy of Sunnysnow)] This song had made the woodcutter very pleased when he heard it. He had noticed that Jing and Rong, two people were riding on the iron boat and using the iron oars to paddle along the river; surely it must be the fisherman down the mountain who lend the boat to them. He did not have any suspicion, and without asking too many questions he simply pointed to a hillside and said, "Go up that way!"

They saw a long rattan about the size of a human's arm hanging along the hillside going up to the peak. Jing and Rong, two people looked up above to see half of the peak was hidden in the cloud, it was unclear how high the peak was.

When Huang Rong and the woodcutter were singing songs, Guo Jing did not understand even half a word of what they

were talking about. As the woodcutter let them go and directed them to go up, he still did not know the reason; but fearing the woodcutter might change his mind, without saying anything he carried Huang Rong on his back, grabbed the long rattan with both of his hands, and with a heave started climbing up.

His arms alternately pulled and they crawled up fast. Just in a short moment they had climbed about a dozen of 'zhang's; indistinctly they could still hear the woodcutter singing something like, " ... in the past people struggled, but where are they now? Victory, they all turned into dust! Defeat, they all turned into dust!"

Crouching on Guo Jing's back Huang Rong laughed and said, "Jing Gege, according to what he said, we don't need to seek medical help."

Guo Jing was baffled, "What?" he asked.

"In any case everybody will die; if I am healed, I will turn into dust! If I am not healed, I will still turn into dust!" Huang Rong said.

"Pei!" Guo Jing spat, "Don't listen to him."

Huang Rong softly sang, "Alive, you carry me on your back! Dead, you carry me on your back!"

Along with Huang Rong's playful song, two people had entered the cloud; all they saw was a vast expanse of whiteness everywhere they looked. It was still summer, the weather was hot, but actually they felt the chill in the air. Huang Rong sighed, "Right in front of our eyes are countless marvels; even if my injury cannot be healed, our trip here will not be in vain."

“Rong’er,” Guo Jing said, “Can you just not mention life and death anymore?”

Huang Rong lowered her head and laughed, she gently blew her breath on the back of Guo Jing’s neck. Guo Jing felt his neck warm and itchy, he called out, “Don’t give me trouble! If my hands slip, both of us will plunge to our death.”

Huang Rong laughed, “Fine!” she said, “This time it wasn’t me who talk about life and death!”

Guo Jing laughed, he could not answer; he crawled up faster and a short moment later they got to the end, or to be precise, the root where the rattan grew. Turned out they had arrived at the peak. They had just set their feet on solid ground when suddenly a loud rumbling was heard, as if a mountain rock burst apart; and then they also heard an ox bellowing loudly, followed by a man’s loud shout.

Guo Jing was surprised, “This peak is so high, yet there is an ox here. So strange!” Carrying Huang Rong on his back he rushed toward the noise.

“The fisherman, the woodcutter, the farmer and the scholar. If there is a farmer, then there must be an ox,” Huang Rong said.

She had just finished talking when they saw a yellow ox on the hillside with its head lifted up, bellowing loudly; but the ox was actually in a very odd position. It was lying on its back on a rock, its four legs struggled but could not stand up. The rock was shaking, ready to fall down, below the rock was a man suspending the rock with both of his hands on top of his head like a letter T; if his hands slipped, both the rock and the ox would fall down into the canyon below. That man was standing on a piece of protruding cliff, there was nowhere he could step back. If he did not want to give

that ox up, the rock would crush down and not only break his arms, but his legs as well. Looking at their condition, apparently that ox was grazing on a hillside and stepped on a loose rock. That man being near tried to save the ox by catching the rock but ended up in this precarious situation.

Huang Rong smiled, "Just now we heard the song 'hillside sheep', and now we see the 'hillside ox'!" she said.

On that mountain peak there was a piece of flat land, already plowed ready for cultivation, about twenty 'mu's [around 1.6 acres or 2/3 of a hectare] rice field. There was a hoe by the edge of the field. The man who held the rock was bare-chested, his legs were covered with mud up to his knees; looked like the ox fell down when he was weeding the grass.

Huang Rong looked around to assess the situation, she mulled over in her heart, "This man obviously is the 'farmer' from 'the fisherman, the woodcutter, the farmer and the scholar'. The ox weighs approximately three hundred catties [about 300 lbs or 150 kg]; looks like that rock is not lighter than the ox. Even though half of the rock is leaning on the hillside, yet looking at his steady feet, this man has an astonishing strength."

Guo Jing had already put her down and rushed to help. Huang Rong hastily called out, "Not so fast, don't be rash!" But Guo Jing thought helping others was more important; he had already arrived by the farmer's side.

He crouched underneath the rock and lifted it up while saying, "I'll hold it, you go and save the ox first!"

That farmer felt his load was getting lighter, but he was still afraid that Guo Jing might not be strong enough to support both the ox and the big rock. He let go his right hand and leaned to the side, but his left hand was still supporting the

bottom of the rock. Guo Jing steadied his legs, then exerted his internal strength and pushed upward with both of his arms; the rock was lifted up for about a foot, giving that farmer an opportunity to let his left hand go.

The farmer waited for a moment. After seeing that the big rock would not crush down, he knew Guo Jing's strength was enough to support it. Finally he stooped down and got out from underneath the rock, leaped to the hillside to save the yellow ox. He could not help but stealing a glance toward Guo Jing to see what kind of hero had suddenly come and offered help. He was astonished since what he saw was an eighteen, nineteen years old youngster. More surprisingly, this youngster's hands were holding up the rock and the ox seemingly without straining himself.

That farmer was always proud of having an outstanding physical strength, but obviously this youngster's strength was far above his. His suspicions arose; he also looked down the hillside and saw a young woman leaning against a rock, her facial expression was weary, like she was suffering from a serious illness. His suspicion deepened, "Friend, what are you doing here?" he asked Guo Jing.

"To seek an audience with your master," Guo Jing replied.

"For what purpose?" the farmer asked again.

Guo Jing was startled and for an instant did not know how to reply. Huang Rong on the side called out, "Quickly pull the ox to safety first, it won't be too late to ask question later. If his hands slip, won't the man and the ox fall down together?"

The farmer thought, "These two are here to see Shifu, how come my two elder martial brothers down the mountain did not shoot whistling arrows? If these two broke through them, that means their martial arts are not to be trifled

with. Now while his hands are not free, I need to understand this matter better." Thereupon he asked, "Are you going to ask my Shifu to treat your injury?"

Guo Jing thought, "The people down the mountains are already aware anyway, there is no need to hide the truth from him." He simply nodded his head.

The farmer's countenance slightly changed, "I need to ask first," he said. Without pulling the ox away he leaped down the hillside.

"Hey!" Guo Jing shouted, "Help me put down this rock first, then we can talk!"

The farmer smiled, "I will be back right away."

Observing what was going on, Huang Rong had already guessed early on that farmer's intention; he wanted to waste Guo Jing's strength. He would deliberately wait for Guo Jing to be weary from suspending the rock, and then he would comeback and lent a hand. By that time it would be easy to expel these two people to go down the mountain. She hated herself for being injured at a time like this that she was unable to help Guo Jing shove away the big rock. She saw the farmer dashed out of the field, did not know when he would be coming back; she was anxious and angry at the same time. "Hey, Uncle!" she called out, "Please come back!"

That farmer paused and smiled, "He has a tremendous strength, nothing bad will happen to him in three-quarter or an hour time, don't worry," he said.

Huang Rong was angry, she thought, "Jing Gege was kind enough to help you, but you actually tricked him and let him trapped for three-quarter or an hour. I have to find a way to give you a lesson." She creased her eyebrows and thought

of an idea, "Uncle," she called, "You want to ask your Shifu's advice, that is very reasonable. Here is a letter from Benevolent Master Hong Qigong to be delivered to your master. Can you take it with you?"

"Ah!" hearing Hong Qigong's name that farmer exclaimed in surprise, "Turned out Miss is the Nine-fingered Divine Beggar's disciple. Does this Xiao Ge [lit. little/young elder brother] also belong to Senior Hong's school? No wonder he is this good." He came back to fetch the letter.

Huang Rong nodded, "Hey, he is my martial brother, capable of lifting several hundreds catties. Speaking of martial art he is not too far below Uncle." Slowly she opened her sack, pretending to find the letter; but first she took the soft hedgehog armor, and then turned her gaze toward Guo Jing, her face had a frightened look. "Aiyo! Not good!" she called out, "His palms are about to be smashed up. Uncle, quickly find a way to help him."

The farmer was startled, but then he laughed, "He is fine," he said, "Where is the letter?" He held out his hand to get the letter.

"You don't know," Huang Rong anxiously said, "My martial brother is practicing the 'pi kong zhang' [hacking/slicing/splitting empty air palm technique]. His palms were soaked in vinegar just last night, but his training is not complete yet. If his palms are put under pressure for a long time, they will be destroyed." On the Peach Blossom Island her father had trained her in 'pi kong zhang' hence she was familiar with the training method.

Although the farmer did not know this martial art, but he was a martial art expert's disciple, his knowledge was extensive; he had heard about this particular martial art, he thought, "If for no apparent reason I caused injury to the

Nine-fingered Divine Beggar's disciple, not only my Shifu would rebuke me, but I would also regret it for the rest of my life. Moreover, he was kind enough to help me. Only I don't know whether what this young miss said was a truth or a lie. I am afraid she is just tricking me into releasing him from underneath the rock."

Huang Rong understood his hesitation, she took the soft hedgehog armor out and shook it. "This is the Peach Blossom Island's most precious treasure, the soft hedgehog armor; blade and sword cannot harm it. I am asking Uncle to put it on his shoulder as a cushion and let him support the rock with his shoulder. That way he won't be able to walk away, but he won't suffer any injury, won't that satisfy both parties? Or else you will cause injury to his palms and my Shifu won't hold you innocent and will find your Shifu to settle the score."

The farmer had also heard about the soft hedgehog armor; half believing and half doubting he took the armor. Huang Rong saw that he was not convinced yet, so she said, "My Shifu taught me not to lie to others, how can I deceive Uncle? If Uncle does not believe me, then try chopping this armor several times."

The farmer saw her innocent face, he thought, "Nine-fingered Divine Beggar is an honorable Senior with high skill, his words are like gold and jade; whenever my Shifu mentioned his name, he always do so with utmost respect and admiration. This young miss also does not look like a liar." It was because he was thinking about his master's safety and well-being that he did not dare to act carelessly. Hence he drew the short blade from his waist and chopped the soft hedgehog armor several times. Sure enough, the armor did not show any trace of damage; it was truly one of the Wulin world's treasures. All his doubts were gone, "Very well, I will put this on his shoulder as a cushion," he said.



Not in a million years did he know that behind Huang Rong's innocent and childlike face hid a heart and mind full of tricks. He took the soft hedgehog armor and went toward Guo Jing. He threw the armor on Guo Jing's shoulder and exerted his strength toward his arms he lifted up the rock and said, "Let your hands go, support this rock with your shoulder."

Leaning on a mountain rock Huang Rong kept her attention toward those two men. As soon as the farmer picked up the big rock she called out, "Jing Gege, 'fei long zai tian' [dragon fly to the sky]!"

Guo Jing felt his hands were free, he also heard Huang Rong's shout; almost without thinking his right palm pushed forward, his left palm made a turn from the right wrist, launching the 'fei long zai tian' from the 18-Dragon Subduing Palms. He leaped to the air, again his right palm turned ahead of his left palm and pushed forward; he landed by Huang Rong's side, with the soft hedgehog armor still perched nicely on his shoulder. He heard the farmer shouting curses; so he turned his head to see the farmer with his hands high in the air, supporting the big rock and was not able to move.

Huang Rong was very proud of herself, she said, "Jing Gege, let's go." Turning her head to the farmer she said, "You have a tremendous strength; nothing bad will happen to you in three-quarter or an hour time, don't worry."

The farmer cursed her, "Little girl, you deceived this old man! You said the Nine-fingered Divine Beggar always keep his words. Humph! This honorable Senior's illustrious name is ruined by a little girl."

Huang Rong smiled, "What did I ruin?" she said, "My Shifu taught me never to tell a lie, but my father said that

deceiving people once in a while is not a big deal. I love to listen to my father, my Shifu cannot do anything about that.”

“Who is your father?” the farmer was angry.

“Ah! Didn’t I let you test the soft hedgehog armor?” Huang Rong asked.

The farmer cursed even more, “I deserve to die! I deserve to die! Turned out this sly little girl is the Old Heretic Huang’s daughter. Why was I so muddleheaded?”

Huang Rong laughed, “That’s right! My Shifu’s words are like a mountain, he has never deceived anybody. This is very difficult to learn, I don’t want to follow his teaching. I’ll say my father’s teaching is better!” She giggled and pulled Guo Jing’s hand, leading him to follow the pathway.

**[Author’s note:** the popular tune originated from the Northern Song Dynasty during its peaceful years. Since its appearance, the tune had become a popular folk song during both the Song and Jin era. The source of “Hillside Sheep” sung by the woodcutter and Huang Rong was actually the later version of the tune.]

**End of Chapter 29.**

## Chapter 30 - Reverend Yideng

Translated by Frans Soetomo



*Successively crossing seven gaps, they heard someone reading aloud; it seemed like they had arrived at the end of the stone bridge. On the*

*other side of the gap a scholar was sitting cross-legged, a book in his hand, from which he was reading. Behind the scholar there was another short gap.*

Two people walked forward following the mountain pathway and before long the pathway had come to an end. Ahead was a stone bridge about one foot wide, perched in between two mountain peaks, covered with cloud that the other end was invisible. If this stone bridge were laid on the ground, it would act just like a narrow alley, nothing to be afraid of; but under the stone bridge was a deep canyon. Just looking at it would cause the heart to tremble with fear, let alone walk across it.

Huang Rong sighed, "This Emperor Duan hid himself really well. If an enemy came full of enmities arrived to this place, half of his hatred would disappear first," she said.

"Why did that fisherman say Emperor Duan has left this mortal world?" Guo Jing asked, "He really caused my heart unrest."

"I really cannot guess what he meant by that," Huang Rong replied, "Looking at his face he didn't seem to be lying. He also said that our Shifu saw it with his own eyes when Emperor Duan passed away."

"Things have come this far, we can only move forward and not go back," Guo Jing said. He squatted to carry Huang Rong on his back, and then with his lightness kungfu walked toward that stone bridge.

The stone bridge's surface was bumpy, plus it was enveloped in thick cloud all year long, which made it exceptionally slippery. The slower they walked the higher

was the chance for them to fall down. Hence Guo Jing dashed forward quickly. After about seven, eight 'zhang's later suddenly Huang Rong called out, "Careful, the bridge's broken ahead."

Guo Jing also saw that the stone bridge was suddenly broken with about seven, eight feet gap in between. Instead of slowing down he ran faster and borrowing the momentum he leaped across the gap.

Huang Rong had already gone through terrible danger; early on she had already disregarded life and death. She laughed and said, "Jing Gege, your flying is not as steady as the white eagles."

Dashing through a section, jumping over a gap, very soon they had crossed seven such gaps. Across the mountain ahead they saw a stretch of flat land. Suddenly they heard someone was reading aloud. Looked like they had arrived at the end of the stone bridge, but at the end of the bridge there was actually a very long gap, almost a 'zhang' wide [about 10 feet or 3 meters]. On the other side of the gap a scholar was sitting cross-legged, a book in his hand, from which he was reading aloud. Behind the scholar there was another short gap.

Guo Jing halted, he stood firm on the bridge, he was at a loss of what to do next, "Jumping over this gap is not too difficult," he thought, "But that scholar is sitting right in the middle of the bridge; other than the place he occupies, there is no place I can set my feet on." Thereupon with a loud voice he called out, "Juniors are seeking audience with your Honorable Master, we are asking Uncle to show us the way."

The scholar's head was swaying while he read with rapt attention, as if he did not hear Guo Jing. Guo Jing raised his

voice and called out one more time, the scholar still turned a deaf ear to him. "Rong'er, what do we do?" Guo Jing said in a low voice.

Huang Rong frowned without saying anything, she looked at the place where that scholar was sitting and realized this matter could be complicated. The stone bridge was so narrow that fighting on it meant a life and death situation. Even if Guo Jing won, they were coming to seek help, how could they harm anybody? She looked at the scholar again, who still did not pay any attention, and could not help but secretly feel worried. She tried to listen to what the scholar was reading, and found out that it was the widely common book of 'lun yu' [Analects of Confucius]. He was reading: "An evening in the spring time, the spring garments were ready. Five, six people wearing hat, six, seven people were young. Taking a bath by the river bank, the breeze made the fountain dance, and the song carried back by the wind."

He was reading with flourish and ardent interest, sighing three times, resembling the spring breeze carrying the song faraway, like he was enjoying the book immensely. Huang Rong thought, "If I want him to open his mouth, I must provoke him." Thereupon she sneered and said, "It's useless even if you read the Confucian Analects a thousand times but do not understand the Master's sublime words with deep meaning."

The scholar was startled and stopped reading immediately. He raised his head and said, "What sublime words with deep meaning? Please enlighten me."

Huang Rong took a good look on that scholar; he looked to be around forty years of age, 'xiao yao jin' [scholar hat] on his head, a folding fan in his hand, a long black beard under his chin, truly he had a scholar's appearance. She coldly

laughed and asked, "Sire, do you know how many disciples Confucius had?"

The scholar smiled, "What's so difficult about that?" he said, "Confucius had 3000 disciples altogether, among those, 72 were his best students."

"From the 72 disciples, some were old and some were young," Huang Rong continued, "Do you know how many disciples wore hat [meaning 'older'] and how many were young?"

The scholar was startled and said, "It was not recorded in the Confucian Analects; other classics and commentaries also do not have that information recorded."

"I said it's useless if you do not understand the Master's sublime words with deep meaning, did I say anything wrong?" Huang Rong asked. "I clearly heard you read just a moment ago, 'Five, six people wearing hat; six, seven people were young.' Five times six is thirty, there were 30 older disciples; six times seven is forty-two, there were 42 younger disciples. You add two numbers together and you will get exactly 72 people. I see you are reading without understanding. Hey! Dangerous! Really dangerous!"

The scholar heard how she made a strong argument on an obscure matter in the classic book, he could not stifle his laugh, but in his heart he also admitted her intelligence and quick-wit. He smiled and said, "Young Miss really has a mind filled with poetry books. My utmost admiration. You want to see my Shifu, may I know for what business?"

Huang thought, "If I say we are here to seek treatment, he will certainly do his utmost to make things difficult for us. But his question cannot be left unanswered. Fine. He was reading the 'Confucian Analects', I will also quote from Confucius to dodge his question." Thereupon she said, "A

Sage I don't have to see! A Gentleman, I may see. A friend came from afar, isn't that a delight to the heart?"

The scholar looked up to the sky and laughed hard for half a day. "All right, all right," he said, "I have three subject tests for you. If you pass, I will take you to see my Shifu. But if you fail even one, I will have to ask you two to go back to where you came from."

"Aiyo!" Huang Rong said, "I haven't read too many books, if it is too difficult I might not be able to answer."

"Not difficult, not difficult," the scholar said, "I have a poem here, inside it hidden my origin in four characters. Let's see if you can guess it."

"Good, a riddle!" Huang Rong said, "It should be interesting. Please say it."

The scholar twisted his beard and started to recite, "Six scriptures have been in the chest for a long time, one sword for ten years has been sharpened in the hand ..."

Huang Rong stuck out her tongue and said, "Skilled in both pen and sword [wen wu quan cai – lit. literature and martial art complete skills], that's terrific!"

The scholar smiled and continued, "On top of an apricot flower a branch hung horizontally; if you are afraid to divulge the heaven's secret, don't open the mouth. One dot escalated as big fight, nevertheless cannot even cover half a bed. The name completed, the hat hung, time to turn back home. My true identity, does Sir know?"

Huang Rong thought, "'The name completed, the hat hung, time to turn back home. My true identity, does Sir know?' Looking at your appearance, you must be Emperor Duan's minister of the days past; hanging your hat following your



master, returning to this hidden wooded mountain. What's so difficult to guess?" Thereupon she said, "When you add a character 'one' (一) and 'ten' (十) underneath the character 'six' (六), it becomes the character 'xin' (新). Add a horizontal line to the character 'apricot' (杏), and take away the character 'mouth' (口), it becomes the character 'wei' (魏). Add a character 'big' (大) to half of a bed (半) and put a dot on it, it becomes the character 'zhuang' (庄). Take the hat off the character 'complete' (全), it becomes the character 'yuan' (元). Xin Wei Zhuang Yuan; please accept my respect. Turned out Sir was the Zhuang Yuan [number one scholar, the title conferred to a person who came out first in the highest imperial examination] of the Xin Wei year."

The scholar was taken aback; he thought his riddle was very difficult. Even if one could finally come out with an answer, it should have taken at least half a day. These two youngsters' martial art skill might be high, but they would not be able to stand on this narrow stone bridge for too long. He thought he would advise them to give up and nicely went back down the mountain. Who would have thought that almost without thinking Huang Rong was able to give him the correct answer. He could not help but feel utterly surprised. He now knew this girl was exceptionally smart; he had to find a more difficult question for her.

He swept his gaze around and saw a row of palm trees by the hillside, the leaves swaying gently in the light breeze, resembling the movement of a fan. He was a zhongyuan, naturally he was more gifted than an average scholar. He waved the fan in his hand and said, "I have the top part of a couplet, asking Miss to please complete it."

"Completing a couplet is not as interesting as a riddle," Huang Rong said, "All right, looks like if I can't complete it, you won't let us pass. Bring it on!"

The scholar waved his fan, pointing to the row of palm trees and said, "The wind sways the palm trees, like a thousand hands waving the folding fan." This top part not only depicted the scenery, but clearly lifted up his position as well.

Huang Rong thought, "If I only mention any object without meaningful correlation, my victory won't be complete." She also swept her gaze around and saw a tiny temple with a lotus pond in front of it. It was the seventh month, the middle of summer, but on this high mountain the mornings were cold; most part of the lotus leaf had already withered by frost. Her heart was moved, she smiled and said, "I have the second part of that couplet, but it will offend Uncle; it's inconvenient for me to say it."

"You might as well say it," the scholar replied.

"You must promise you are not going to get angry," Huang Rong said.

"I won't," the scholar promised.

Huang Rong pointed to the 'xiao yao jin' on his head and said, "Very well. My second line is: The frost withers the lotus leaf, like a one-legged demon wearing a 'xiao yao jin'."

At this second line the scholar burst out in laughter. "Wonderful! Wonderful!" he said, "Not only the line is very appropriate, it came very quick too!"

Guo Jing saw the lotus stem did indeed prop up a withered leaf, looking like a single-legged ghost wearing a 'xiao yao jin'; he could not help laughing too. Huang Rong smiled, "Don't laugh, don't laugh!" she said, "Once we fall down we will become a pair of ghosts without the 'xiao yao jin'!"

The scholar thought, "Ordinary couplet won't baffle her; I will have to resort to the ultimate." Suddenly he remembered when he was a young student his teacher mentioned a couplet that for dozens of years nobody could ever complete; he decided to make things difficult for her; thereupon he said, "I have another couplet, asking Miss to complete it: 'qin se pi pa ( 琴瑟琵琶 ) [qin, se and pi pa are all stringed-instruments], all heads adorned by eight big kings'."

Listening to this Huang Rong was delighted, "Qin se pi pa four characters altogether have eight 'king' ( 王 ) characters on them; originally it was a very difficult couplet. It's a pity this couplet is not your own creation. Father had solved this couplet many years ago on the Peach Blossom Island when he had nothing else to do. I will pretend to have difficulty completing it to tease him."

She wrinkled her brow and made her face looked distressed. The scholar was delighted she was finally baffled; he felt very smug. But then he was afraid Huang Rong would ask him back, so he said up front, "This is a very difficult couplet, I don't have the answer either. But we have agreed that if Miss cannot answer it then you must return."

Huang Rong smiled, "What's so difficult to complete the couplet? Only I have just offended Uncle, now with my answer I will offend all four of you, the fisherman, the woodcutter, the farmer and the scholar; that's why I was so hesitant to say it."

The scholar did not believe her, he thought, "Just completing the couplet is an extremely difficult task to do; how can you offend us four martial brothers at the same time?" Hence he said, "If you really can complete the couplet, what harm will a little joke bring?"

Huang Rong smiled, "If that's the case, let me ask for your forgiveness first. The second line is, 'chi mei wang liang ( 痴 魔 王 凉 ) [mountain elf, demon, elf, fairy - all are fairy tales supernatural characters; all characters have 'demon' ( 魔 ) on their sides], four little demons with their belly and intestines'."

The scholar was astonished, he sprang up to stand; with his long sleeve fluttered he dashed toward Huang Rong, "I give up with full admiration," he said.

Huang Rong returned his obeisance and said with a smile, "If four honorable Uncles did not do your utmost to hinder us going up the mountain, your couplets were really difficult to complete."

Turned out when Huang Yaoshi solved this riddle, Chen Xuanfeng, Qu Lingfeng, Lu Chengfeng and Feng Mofeng, four disciples were by his side; Huang Yaoshi meant this second line as a joke to his four disciples. That time Huang Rong was not even born yet. Later she heard her father recalling this story and today she managed to use the same line to make fun of the fisherman, the woodcutter, the farmer and the scholar.

"Humph," the scholar snorted. He turned around to make a small gap and said, "Please."

Guo Jing was standing quietly listening to these two exchanging literary attacks to each other; he was afraid Huang Rong would not be able reply and thus waste all previous efforts. Seeing that the scholar moved aside to make a way for them, he was very delighted. He exerted his strength and jumped over the gap; landed on the spot where the scholar had previously sat. Finally he jumped over the last gap.

The scholar noticed how Guo Jing leaped over the gaps with ease even while carrying Huang Rong on his back; he sighed and said in his heart, "I pride myself as highly skilled in both literary and martial art; actually in literature I am inferior to this young girl, and in martial art I am not this youngster's match. Ashamed, I am really ashamed." He glanced sideways to see Huang Rong's delighted expression; he thought this girl had just beat an honorable and highly educated 'zhuang yuan', no wonder she could not hide her upbeat feeling. He thought, "Let me tease her, teaching her not to be too self-complacent!" Thereupon he said, "Miss' literary talent is extraordinary, but your behavior is lacking."

"I beg your explanation," Huang Rong said.

The scholar replied, "Mengzi [Mencius] wrote in his book: 'Men and women do not get intimate, that is only proper.' I see Miss is an unmarried woman, this 'Xiao Ge' [little elder brother] is not your husband; how can he carried you on his back? Mengzi said a brother can help a drowning sister-in-law, or an uncle helps his niece. Miss has not fallen into the water, this 'Xiao Ge' is also not your brother-in-law. This kind of carrying and hugging is truly violating religious teaching."

"Humph," Huang Rong thought, "Brother Jing is good to me, yet other people always make a big deal of the fact that he is not my husband. Shige [martial (older) brother] Lu Chengfeng also said the same thing as this scholar." Thereupon she said point-blankly, "Mengzi loved to talk nonsense; how can you believe what he said?"

The scholar was offended, "Mengzi was a great and worthy sage; why can't we believe what he said?"

Huang Rong smiled and recited, "How can a beggar have two wives? Where did the neighbor have so many chickens from? The Zhou (dynasty) still had an emperor, why discuss many matters with the Wei and Qi (dynasties)?"

The more the scholar thought, the more he realized the truth in what she said. He stood there staring blankly, unable to say a single word.

Actually it was Huang Yaoshi who wrote that saying. He loathed the traditions and despised empty alms; he loved to scrutinize, refute, ridicule and satirize the empty meanings of old sayings handed down from great and worthy sages. Once he made many poems and songs to satirize Confucius and Mencius.

Mencius told a story about a man from the Qi dynasty who had a wife and a concubine and yet he begged for cold rice and spoiled soup; also about another man who everyday stole a chicken from his neighbor. Huang Yaoshi said that these two stories were used to swindle others. About the later sayings the story went like this: During the Warring States period (475 – 221 BC) the Zhou Emperor was still on his throne, yet why did Mencius not support the royal family; but went to Prince Liang Hui and Prince Qi Xuan to whom he asked for a governmental position? Huang Yaoshi thought this action greatly disobeyed the way of the saints and sages.

The scholar thought, "The man of Qi stealing chicken was a metaphor, unworthy of deeper study; but the last sentence, I am afraid even Mengzi himself under the ground would have difficulty refuting." He looked at Huang Rong's eyes and thought, "She is so young, how can she possess such weird intelligence?" Without saying anything else he led two people walked forward.

When passing the lotus pond his gaze was caught by a lotus leaf on the pond; he could not help stealing a glance toward Huang Rong. Huang Rong stifled her laugh and turned her head another direction.

The scholar led the two people entering the temple, asked them to sit in the east wing and had a young monk serve tea. "Please wait for a moment here," the scholar said, "I am going to report to the Master."

"Wait!" Guo Jing said, "That Farmer Uncle is still holding up a big rock on the hillside; he can't get away by himself. Uncle please help him first." The scholar was startled and dashed out.

"Now we can open the yellow pouch," Huang Rong said.

"Ah, if you did not mention it, I would have totally forgotten," Guo Jing said. Hastily he took out the yellow pouch and tore it open. Inside the pouch was a plain sheet of paper without any characters written on it, only a drawing.

The drawing depicted a man wearing royal attire of the India. The man was cutting his own flesh with a knife; his whole body was a mass of cuts and bruises, dripping with blood. There was a scale in front of him; on one end of the balance stood a white pigeon, on the other piled his cut flesh. The pigeon looked small, but it was heavier than the pile of flesh on the other end. A fierce looking hawk stood next to the scale.

The pen stroke of the drawing was quite shoddy. Huang Rong thought, "Turned out that Ying Gu has not learned how to draw; her handwriting is not bad, but this drawing is like a child's scribbling." She looked at the drawing for half a day, but could not decipher what it meant.

Seeing Huang Rong could not guess what the drawing was about, Guo Jing thought it was useless for him to try. He folded the drawing and held it in his hand.

Not too long after they heard footsteps coming into the hall; the farmer walked in, ablaze in anger, supported by the scholar. He was very weary supporting that big rock for a long time.

About the time needed to drink a cup of tea later a young monk walked in; clasping his hands in front of his chest he said, "Gentleman and lady have come from a far; I wonder what your noble concern was?"

"We are seeking an audience with Emperor Duan," Guo Jing replied, "We must inconvenience you to announce our visit."

"Emperor Duan is no longer in this mortal world, your wearisome trip has been in vain," the young monk clasped his hands again, "Please have some vegetable dish, and then Little Monk will see you down the mountain."

Guo Jing was very disappointed; he thought of their untold hardship to get to this place, and now they have to go back down the mountain, how could this thing be good? But when Huang Rong saw the temple she was 30% sure, now seeing this young monk, she was 50, 60% sure. She took the drawing from Guo Jing's hand and said, "Disciples Guo Jing and Huang Rong are here, hoping your respectable master would respect past relationship with the Nine-fingered Divine Beggar and the Peach Blossom Island, and grant us audience. We would appreciate it if you could give this sheet of paper to your master."

The young monk received the drawing. He did not dare to open it up; he only clasped his hands and turned around to go inside. Before long he came back, lowered his head and



clasping his hands he said, "Respectfully invite you to come." Guo Jing was ecstatic, he helped Huang Rong up and together they followed the young monk went inside.

Although the temple looked small, it was very deep. Three people walked through a small alley covered with green flagstones, passed through a dense and shady small bamboo grove. The place was very quiet and serene, causing whoever went inside to shed their impure thoughts.

There were three stone houses hidden among the bamboo trees. The young monk lightly shoved the door open and stepped aside, bowing his body to let the two to enter in.

Guo Jing had a very good impression toward this polite and courteous monk; he smiled to express his gratitude, then side by side with Huang Rong he walked in.

Inside the room he saw a small table with a sandalwood incense burner on top of it; next to the table two Buddhist monks sat on circular meditation mats. One monk had a dark complexion with high nose and deep eyes; apparently he was an Indian monk. The other monk was wearing a robe made of coarse cloth; his white eyebrows so long that they drooped down from the corner of his eyes. His face was gentle; although his eyes showed a trace of sadness, at a glance his overall expression was that of a graceful and majestic person. The scholar and the farmer were standing behind him.

All of Huang Rong's suspicion vanished; she lightly pulled Guo Jing's hand and walked to the monk with long eyebrows; she knelt and bowed down to the ground and said, "Disciples Guo Jing and Huang Rong greet Shibo." [Translator's note: Shibo - martial uncle, the character 'bo' here denotes 'older than one's father' or 'father's elder brother', but since English does not differentiate between

'older' and 'younger' uncles, the generic word of 'Uncle' will be used throughout the chapter.]

Guo Jing was startled, but without thinking he simply followed Huang Rong's example and bowed to the ground, kowtowing four times.

The monk with long-eyebrows smiled slightly; he stood up and held out his hands to raise the two people up. He said with a smile, "Qi Xiong [Brother Qi] had accepted a fine disciple, and Yao Xiong [Brother Yao] had gotten a fine daughter. I heard them say," he pointed his finger to the farmer and the scholar, "Your martial arts are far superior to my disciples'. Ha ... ha ... congratulations, congratulations!"

Listening to him speaking Guo Jing thought, "This speech obviously belonged to Emperor Duan; fitting his position as an emperor, but how come he turned into a monk? It's very confusing. Why did they say that he is no longer in this mortal world? How did Rong'er know he is the Emperor Duan?"

He heard the monk said to Huang Rong, "Are your father and Shifu well? When we met during the Sword Meet of Mount Hua your father has not married yet. Unexpectedly it has been twenty years and he got this beautiful daughter. Do you have any brothers or sisters? Which Senior hero is your mother's father?"

Huang Rong's eyes turned red, she said, "My mother gave birth to me only; she passed away long time ago. I don't even know her family."

"Ah!" the monk exclaimed, lightly patting her shoulder consolingly. "I have been meditating for three days and three nights, and ended just a moment ago," he said, "Have you been waiting long?"

Huang Rong pondered, "Looking at his face, he is very happy to see us. If that's the case, then stopping us and not letting us go up the mountain was his disciples' idea." Hence, she replied, "Disciples have just arrived. Fortunately these Uncles did their utmost to make things difficult for us; otherwise we would have arrived much earlier, Duan Shibo would still be in meditation and our visit would be in vain."

The monk chuckled and said, "They are afraid that I see too many outsiders. But actually how can we consider you as outsiders? Young Miss' sharp tongue must come from your family. Emperor Duan has early on left this mortal world; I am now called Monk Yideng. ['yi deng he shang' - (Buddhist) monk 'one lamp'] Your Shifu was present when I followed the three treasures; but I am afraid your father did not know."

It was only then did Guo Jing finally understood, "It turned out that Emperor Duan shaved his head and became a monk. He left the life of common man; that's why his disciples said Emperor Duan has left this mortal world. Shifu witnessed it when he became a monk; if it was him who told us to come here, naturally he would not tell us to find Emperor Duan, but to see Reverend Yideng [yi deng da shi - great master Yideng; 'da shi' was a common respectable term to address a Buddhist monk]. Rong'er is really smart; just by looking at him she understood everything."

He heard Huang Rong say, "My father did not know anything about it; my Shifu also did not tell disciples."

Yideng smiled, "Certainly. There are more things going into your Shifu's mouth than things coming out of it. He eats a lot, he speaks a little. He wouldn't discuss the Old Monk's business with others. You have been through a lot of hardships; have you eaten yet? Ah!" Speaking to this point

he suddenly startled. He pulled Huang Rong's hand and took her to the door to look at her face under the bright sunlight. He carefully examined her with a puzzled look on his own face.

Although Guo Jing was slow, he was aware that Reverend Yideng had discovered Huang Rong's injury. His heart was broken; abruptly he bent his knees and kowtowed several times. Yideng held out his hands underneath Guo Jing's arms to raise him up. Guo Jing felt a burst of energy lifting his body up. He did not dare to use his strength to resist; riding on the force he slowly stood up and said, "I beg the Reverend to save her life!"

When Yideng raised Guo Jing up, he was not only asking Guo Jing not to have too much ritual, but was also testing Guo Jing's strength. Yideng was only using 50% of his strength; if he felt that Guo Jing was not able to resist, he would have retracted his force. He did not have any intention to use force against Guo Jing, if Guo Jing stayed motionless he would not add any more strength. However, in this one encounter he found out Guo Jing's martial art to be deep. He did not expect Guo Jing to be able to ride on his force and stand up, automatically dispersing his energy. This surprised Yideng more than if Guo Jing only resisted by staying motionless on the ground. Yideng secretly thought, "Qi Xiong had really accepted a very fine disciple; no wonder my own disciples candidly admitted their defeat."

It was at this moment that Guo Jing said, "I beg the Reverend to save her life!" He had just finished speaking when suddenly he felt his legs wobble, his body involuntarily moved forward one step. Quickly he exerted his strength to resist but his body refused to obey his mind; his face turned red all over. He was shocked. "Reverend Yideng's force can continue for so long!" he thought, "I've already tried to disperse it; unexpectedly it continued to lift

me up. The incoming force has been broken, but a short moment later my own opposing force uncontrollably propelled myself forward. If it were a real fight wouldn't my little life be gone? Eastern Heretic, Western Poison, Southern Emperor and Northern Beggar truly deserve their reputations." This time he bowed and kowtowed with much more admiration; what he felt in his heart showed on his face.

Yideng noticed Guo Jing's countenance showed a scared and admiring look, he stretched out his hand to gently pat Guo Jing's shoulder and said with a smile, "You have trained to this level, it really is not easy." Meanwhile he had not released Huang Rong's hand; he turned his head and smiled, "Child, don't be afraid, set your heart at peace," he said with a gentle voice. Then he helped her to sit on the meditation mat.

In all her life Huang Rong never had anybody treated her with such compassion. Her father loved her very much, but his manner was a little bit eccentric. Normally he would treat her as a friend, without revealing the deep love a father had for his daughter. This time listening to Yideng's warm words all of a sudden Huang Rong was overwhelmed as if she suddenly felt her mother's tender love; the love she had never experienced. All the pain and suffering she endured for quite some time since she was injured suddenly burst out uncontrollably. "Wah!" she broke into tears.

Reverend Yideng said with a comforting voice, "Good child, don't cry, don't cry! Uncle will certainly fix all the pain you feel." Who would have thought that the gentler and more comforting his words were, the more Huang Rong was overwhelmed and she cried even louder. It was not until much later did her cry eventually become sobs as she tried to regain her composure.

Hearing his promise Guo Jing was ecstatic, but upon turning his head around he saw the scholar and the farmer's stiff eyebrows and bulging eyes; they were staring at him with angry looks on their faces. Guo Jing felt bad while thinking, "We can reach this place entirely due to Rong'er's craftiness, no wonder they are mad. Reverend Yideng is this compassionate, yet his disciples were determined to hinder us. I wonder why?"

He heard Reverend Yideng say, "Child, how did you get injured? How did you get to this place? Why don't you tell your uncle everything?" And so Huang Rong wiped her tears and told him how she mistook Qiu Qianren as Qiu Qianzhang, how she took his palms strike and everything that happened.

When Yideng heard the name Iron Palm Qiu Qianren, he frowned slightly, but immediately went back to listening Huang Rong attentively. While speaking, Huang Rong kept her eyes open to see Yideng's face; even though his frown was very slight it did not escape Huang Rong's eyes. When she got to the point where they met Ying Gu at the Black Marsh forest and how she gave them direction to find this place, Reverend Yideng's countenance once again momentarily changed; he lowered his head in deep thought, seemingly he was reminiscing over past events, and was grieved and pained over them.

A moment after Huang Rong shut her mouth Reverend Yideng heaved a sigh and asked, "And then what happened?"

Huang Rong continued by recounting how the fisherman, the woodcutter, the farmer and the scholar had used all possible means to make things difficult for them. The woodcutter easily let them go up the mountain, therefore, she said some praising words on his behalf; but to the rest

of them she added some spices to make their offenses worse than they were. Deliberately she made the scholar and the farmer mad.

Several times Guo Jing interrupted her, saying, "Rong'er, don't talk nonsense; these Uncles are not that bad!" But Huang Rong kept talking like a spoiled child in front of Reverend Yideng, telling him all kind of things, making the faces of the two disciples standing behind Yideng turn red and blue. They did not dare to open up their mouths in the presence of their master.

Reverend Yideng repeatedly nodded his head, "(Sigh), how can you treat guests coming from afar like that? These kids were really rude towards friends; I am going to tell them to apologize to you two later."

Huang Rong stared at the scholar and the farmer with a smug expression; meanwhile her mouth did not stop; she told everything until how they ended up at the temple's gate. "Afterwards I gave that drawing for you to see, and you asked me in; then they did not dare to hinder us anymore," she said.

"What drawing?" Yideng was surprised.

"It's about some eagle, some pigeon, and someone cutting his own flesh," Huang Rong replied.

"Whom did you give it to?" Yideng asked.

Before Huang Rong could answer the scholar took the drawing from his pocket and presented it with both hands. "Disciple has it," he said, "Shifu has not finished meditation just now, I have not presented it to Shifu yet."

Yideng held out his hand to take the drawing, he smiled to Huang Rong and said, "You see, if you did not mention it, I

wouldn't know a thing." Slowly he opened up the drawing and looked at it; he knew what the drawing meant. He smiled and said, "Turned out others were afraid I would not help you and sent this drawing to stir me up. Don't you think they underestimated the Old Monk too much?"

Huang Rong turned her head to see anxiety and deep concern on the scholar and the farmer's faces; she felt strange. "Why is it that when they heard their Shifu promise to treat me they looked like they are losing their lifeblood? Is the medicine the most precious pill that they hate to give it up?" She turned her head back to see Yideng was carefully examining the drawing. He brought it under the sunlight to see the quality of the paper, he lightly flicked it several times; his face showed suspicions.

"Did Ying Gu draw this picture?" he asked Huang Rong.

"Yes," Huang Rong answered.

Yideng was silent for half a day then asked again, "Did you see it with your own eyes when she did it?"

Huang Rong knew something was amiss; she tried to recollect what happened that time and said, "When Ying Gu wrote those, her back was toward us. I saw her pen moved, but I did not see with my own eyes whether she was writing or drawing."

"You said she gave you two other pouches; let me see the contents of the other pouches," Yideng said.

Guo Jing took the pouches from his pocket and Yideng examined them; his face changed slightly. "Indeed that is so," he muttered softly. He gave the three sheets of paper to Huang Rong and said, "Yao Xiong is an expert in calligraphy and paintings; your educational background came from your family, certainly you understand connoisseurship. Why



don't you take a look at these three sheets and tell me what you think."

Huang Rong took the papers to take a look and immediately said, "These two sheets are ordinary 'yu ban zhi' [jade register paper], but the drawing was made on a 'jiu jian zhi' [old cocoon paper], a rarely seen type of paper."

Yideng nodded his head, "Hmm, in calligraphy and painting I am a layman, what do you think about this drawing?"

Huang Rong examined the drawing carefully; she smiled and said, "Uncle is only pretending to be a layman! You have known from the start that it was not Ying Gu who draw this picture."

Yideng's countenance slightly changed, "Then it is true it was not her painting? I am only guessing based on logic, I really was not looking at the drawing."

Huang Rong tugged his arm, saying, "Uncle, look, the writing on these two sheets of paper are delicate and elegant while the stroke on this drawing is very stiff. Hmm, this drawing is made by a man. Yes, I am sure it is a man's pen-stroke. This man did not know a thing about calligraphy or painting, but his pen-stroke is powerful, it even penetrated the paper to its back ... This ink looked very old, I think it is even older than my own age."

Reverend Yideng heaved a heavy sigh; he pointed his finger to a book on top of a bamboo table, signaling the scholar to fetch it. The scholar walked over and fetched it, and handed it over to his master. Huang Rong saw on the yellowing page of the cover two rows of characters that read, 'The Great Buddhist Scripture by Maming Bodhisattva. Translated by 'san cang jiu mo luo shen' [name of a saint] of Guizi in the Western Region.' She thought, "I am not going to understand anything if he starts preaching to me."

Yideng casually flipped open the cover of the book, put the drawing next to it and said, "Take a look."

"Ah!" Huang Rong softly exclaimed, "The same paper quality." Yideng nodded.

Guo Jing did not understand, he whispered, "What paper quality is the same?"

Huang Rong said, "Look carefully, isn't the paper quality of this book the same as that drawing?"

Guo Jing looked over carefully; the paper of the book was coarse and thick, mixed with strands of yellow silk threads, exactly the same as the paper of the drawing. "They are the same," he said, "So what?"

Huang Rong did not reply, she looked at Reverend Yideng, waiting for an explanation.

Reverend Yideng said, "This book was brought by my martial brother from the western region."

During the entire time Guo Jing and Huang Rong talked to Yideng, they had not paid any attention to the Indian monk; only now did they turn their gaze to him. He was sitting cross-legged on the meditation mat, as if he was oblivious to the discussion of these people.

"This book came from the western region, this drawing also came from the western region," Yideng continued, "Have you ever heard of the western region's White Camel Mountain?"

Huang Rong was startled, "Western Poison Ouyang Feng?" she asked.

Yideng slowly nodded, "Correct," he said, "This picture was drawn by Ouyang Feng." Hearing this Guo Jing and Huang

Rong were shocked and could not say anything for a while.

Yideng smiled and said, "This Ouyang fellow had planned this for a long time; he truly anticipated far ahead."

"Uncle," Huang Rong said, "I didn't know this drawing came from the Old Poison; this man always harbors evil intentions."

Yideng smiled and said, "For a Nine Yin Manual men can do great things."

"This drawing has something to do with the Nine Yin Manual?" Huang Rong asked.

Yideng saw her excitement and surprise, he noticed her cheeks turned red; looked like she was straining and was able to stay awake due to her strong internal energy. Thereupon Yideng held out his hand to support her right arm and said, "Let's talk about this some other time, right now it is more important to treat your injury."

Yideng helped her up and walked slowly toward the building next door. When they arrived at the door opening, the scholar and the farmer exchanged a glance and together they rushed toward the door. They knelt down and said, "Shifu, let your disciples try to treat this Miss' injury."

Yideng shook his head, "Do you think your skill is sufficient? Can you treat her until she is completely cured?"

The scholar and the farmer said, "Disciples will try to do our best."

Yideng's face turned serious. "Human life is an important matter, how can you easily try?"

The scholar said, "These two came here by some evil people's direction; definitely without any good intention."

Although Shifu's mercy is abundant, you can't fall into evil people's treacherous plan."

Yideng heaved a sighed, "What did I teach you day in and day out? Go and take a good look at this picture." While speaking he gave the drawing in his hand away.

The farmer knocked his head to the ground and said, "This drawing was made by Ouyang Feng; Shifu, this is Ouyang Feng's evil plan." While speaking thus his anxiety was obvious; tears flowing down his cheeks.

Jing and Rong two people were puzzled, "How does the evil plan relate to treating an injury?" they thought.

Reverend Yideng gently said, "Get up, get up. Don't make our guests' hearts uneasy." His voice was gentle, but full of resolution. The two disciples knew it was useless to argue further; they stood up with their heads hung low.

Reverend Yideng took Huang Rong to the next door building. He beckoned Guo Jing and said, "You also come." Guo Jing followed them entering the room.

Yideng unrolled the bamboo curtain hung above the door down. He took an incense stick and stuck it on the burner on top of a small bamboo table.

The four walls of the room were drab, other than the small bamboo table there were only three meditation mats. Yideng ordered Huang Rong to sit on the middle mat while he himself sat cross-legged on the mat next to her. He turned his gaze toward the bamboo curtain and said to Guo Jing, "You stay and guard that door, don't let anybody come in, including my own disciples." Guo Jing complied.

Yideng closed his eyes, but suddenly he opened his eyes and added, "If they resort to violence you must fight. Your

martial sister's life depends on it. Remember, it's very important."

"Yes!" Guo Jing said, but actually he was confused, "His disciples revere him, how can they dare to disobey their master's order and come barging in?" he thought.

Yideng turned toward Huang Rong and said, "Relax your whole body; no matter how much you feel hurt or itchy, you must not resist at all."

Huang Rong smiled, "I consider myself dead already."

Yideng also smiled, "You are such a smart doll." He closed his eyes immediately, his eyebrows hung down, he circulated his energy. When the incense was about an inch burnt suddenly he leaped up, left palm on his chest, right index finger stretched out, slowly he pointed his finger toward the 'bai hui' [hundred joins] acupoint on Huang Rong's head. Huang Rong's body slightly jumped up involuntarily; she felt a stream of heat flowing from the top of her head down.

Reverend Yideng retracted his finger immediately, without moving his body his second finger hit the 'hou ding' [rear peak] acupoint located about one 'cun' five 'fen' [1 cun is approximately 1 inch, 1 fen is about 1 third of a centimeter (a little over 1/8 of an inch)] behind the 'bai hui' acupoint. Successively he hit the 'qiang jian' [powerful space], 'nao hu' [brain door], 'feng fu' [wind manor], 'da zhui' [big spine], 'tao dao' [pottery way], 'shen zhu' [life pillar], 'shen dao' [divine way], along the 'ling tai' [soul platform] downward; so that when the incense was halfway burnt he had already hit thirty consecutive main acupoints of the 'du mai' [supervised arteries or channels] group on her body.

By this time Guo Jing's martial art knowledge and experience was already incomparable to the past. He stood

on the side watching Yideng's finger move slowly, his arm floating in the air. He hit these thirty acupoints with thirty different acupoint sealing techniques. Each one was a mind opening technique; admittedly the Six Freaks of Jiangnan had never taught him this kind of technique, the 'sealing acupoint section' in the Nine Yin Manual also did not contain this technique. He had never seen anything like this before, he had never even heard about it. He was having a blurred vision just by watching; his tongue tied. He only knew that Reverend Yideng was demonstrating an upper class martial art; it never crossed Guo Jing's mind that Yideng was using his lifetime cultivated energy to open up Huang Rong's eight main arteries.

After the 'du mai' group was done, Yideng sat down to take a rest. After Guo Jing lighted up another incense he leaped back up and started to hit Huang Rong's 'ren mai' [assigned arteries/channels] group consisting of twenty-five acupoints. This time his hand movements were very swift; his arms vibrated, just like dragonflies soaring above the water. Just in one breath he had finished hitting all 'ren mai' acupoints. These twenty-five moves were lightning fast, but each finger movement did not miss even a single hair width.

Guo Jing was frightened and full of admiration at the same time; he thought, "(Sigh) There is such skill in the world!"

Meanwhile Yideng had started with the 'yin wei mai' [negative preserved arteries/channels] consisting of fourteen acupoints. Once again he used different technique; this time he moved powerfully like a flying dragon or striding tiger. Although Yideng was wearing a kassaya [Buddhist robe], but in Guo Jing's eyes he did not look like a monk who followed the three-treasure way, but an emperor, ruler of tens of thousands people.

The 'yin wei mai' group finished, without taking a rest Reverend Yideng continued with the 'yang wei mai' [positive preserved arteries/channels] consisting of thirty-two acupoints. This time he did it long distance; for instance, he moved about a 'zhang' away from Huang Rong, then suddenly pounced forward and hit the 'feng chi' [wind reservoir] acupoint on Huang Rong's neck, followed by leaping backward. He did this in succession, without any perceivable pause.

Guo Jing thought, "Fighting closely with an expert is dangerous; by using this technique not only I can overcome the enemy, but putting up a strong defense as well. This is a very wonderful technique." With rapt attention he watched Yideng go back and forth; the movements were truly marvelous. It was especially difficult to attack and withdrew that fast, with matchless agility of a fish darting in the water or a rabbit running away from the hunter. Suddenly a thought came into his mind, "When I fought Ying Gu, her body was very slippery. For a third part her technique resembled the Reverend's attacking acupoint technique; seemed like she got her inspiration from the Reverend, but her skill is fallen short, far below his."

Two incense sticks later Reverend Yideng had finished with her 'yin wei mai' and the 'yang wei mai' two arteries [or channels] groups. When he started the 'ju gu' [gigantic bone] acupoint on her neck, suddenly Guo Jing's heart stirred, "Ah! Doesn't the Nine Yin Manual contain this? I was so stupid not to understand this earlier." Silently he recited the Manual while watching Reverend Yideng's movements and compared them with the Manual; he found out that Reverend Yideng's sealing acupoint technique carried infinite variations. It was like Reverend Yideng was acting out and opening out the secret of the marvelous martial arts in the Nine Yin Manual. Guo Jing had not

learned enough and he did not dare to learn Yideng's Solitary Yang Finger, but with his knowledge of the Manual he had quite a comprehension of this unique skill.

At last the 'dai mai' [band/belt arteries/channels] group were opened successfully. The blood was flowing unobstructed through all the seven groups of passageways contained in the manual. 'Dai mai' was the passageway looped around the waist like a belt. Presently Reverend Yideng was behind Huang Rong's back, walking backward with his finger pointed backward slowly hitting her 'zhang men' [section gate] acupoint.

The 'dai mai' consisted of eight acupoints. Yideng stretched out his hand slowly, as if with great difficulty; his mouth gasping for breath, his body swaying, like he could not even support his own weight.

Guo Jing was shocked; he saw beads of perspirations trickling down Yideng's forehead, sweat dripping down like rain from the tip of his long eyebrows. Guo Jing wanted to step forward and help, but he was afraid he might mess things up. He turned to look at Huang Rong's condition and saw her clothes were soaked with sweat. She was knitting her brows and biting her lips; like she was trying to resist unbearable pain with all her might.

Suddenly Guo Jing heard a 'shua' sound, the bamboo curtain behind him was opened and somebody shouted loudly, "Shifu!" and somebody barged in through the door.

Almost without thinking Guo Jing launched the 'divine dragon swings its tail'; his right palm swung backward and with a slapping sound it hit that person's shoulder. Guo Jing turned around to see somebody was staggering two steps backward; it was the fisherman.



Because his iron boat and iron oars were stolen he was unable to go upstream the creek to the mountain peak; he had to take a long walk more than 20 'li's around the back of the mountain. Upon arriving he heard his Shifu has already started treating that young miss' injury; he was very anxious and rushed toward the room with the intention of imploring his master not to do that. Unexpectedly he was pushed back by Guo Jing's attack. He stood back up to try again. In the meantime the woodcutter, the farmer, and the scholar three people had also arrived outside the door.

"It's over; what else can we stop?" the scholar angrily said.

Guo Jing turned around to see Reverend Yideng sit cross-legged on the meditation mat, his face deathly pale, his monk robe completely soaked in sweats. Huang Rong was lying down on the floor, unmoving; it was not clear whether she was dead or alive. Guo Jing was very shocked; he rushed forward to prop her up. First thing he noticed was a fishy stench coming out of her nose. He looked at her face and found it was bloodless bluish pale, but the faint black shadow on her face had actually gone. He held out his hand to feel her breathing and was greatly relieved to find a steady albeit weak breathing.

The fisherman, the woodcutter, the farmer and the scholar were sitting around their master in silence, with apprehensive looks on their faces. Guo Jing kept his eyes on Huang Rong. He saw her face gradually turn pink, he was ecstatic; who would have thought that the pink turned to red and very soon her cheeks were fiery hot. A short moment later beads of perspiration started to form on her forehead while her countenance was gradually turning back to white. This cycle happened three times, every time she was sweating profusely.

“Mmm,” Huang Rong moaned softly then she opened her eyes. “Jing Gege, where is the stove, uh, the ice?” she asked.

Hearing her voice Guo Jing’s delight was unspeakable, with a trembling voice he said, “What stove? What ice?”

Huang Rong looked around, shook her head and smiled, “Ah, I was having a nightmare,” she said, “I saw Ouyang Feng, Ouyang Ke and Qiu Qianren. They put me inside the stove to be roasted; and when I was hot, they put ice to cool me down. Once I cool down they put me back into the stove. (Sigh), it was really scary. Uh, how is Uncle?”

Yideng slowly opened up his eyes and smiled, “Your injury is healed, all you need is a day or two of total rest – you can’t move unnecessarily; and you will be all right.”

“I don’t have any strength left in my entire body,” Huang Rong said, “I can’t even lift up a finger.” The farmer was looking at her angrily. Huang Rong ignored him, she turned to Yideng and said, “Uncle, you have spent so much energy to treat me, you must be very tired. I have some Nine Flowered Jade Dew Pills, made according to my father’s recipe. How about you take some?”

Yideng happily said, “Good, I did not think you would bring these energy-booster miracle pills. That year when we had the Sword Meet of Mount Hua each one of us was dead tired after the competition; your father gave us some of these pills and the effectiveness was marvelous.”

Guo Jing quickly took the small bag of pills from Huang Rong’s backpack and handed it over to Yideng. The woodcutter went to the kitchen to fetch a bowl of clear water, while the scholar poured the pills on his palm and presented them to his master.

Yideng laughed, "Why so many? These pills are not easy to make, we'll just take half."

The scholar anxiously replied, "Shifu, all the miracle pills in the world won't be enough."

Yideng conceded since he felt extremely exhausted; he took several dozens of Nine Flowered Jade Dew Pills from his disciple's hand and swallowed them all, washed by a bowl of clear water. He turned to Guo Jing and said, "Take your Shimei [Martial (younger) Sister] to have a couple of days' rest and then you can go down the mountain. You don't need to see me again. Hmm, I have something I want you to promise me."

Guo Jing bowed to the ground and 'bonk, bonk, bonk, bonk', knocked his head to the floor. Huang Rong ordinarily loved to joke around and be casual with everybody. Even in the presence of her father and her master she still did not follow proper junior-senior relationship; yet this time she actually bowed down reverently and said with a low voice, "Uncle has saved my life, I will not dare to forget even for a moment."

Yideng smiled and said, "It's better if you forget about it; don't let it hang in your mind." Turning his head to Guo Jing he said, "Don't tell anybody that you have come up this mountain; don't ever tell it, even to your Shifu."

Guo Jing was just thinking about taking Hong Qigong up the mountain to ask Yideng to treat his injury; hearing this he could not help but was taken aback and did not know what to say.

Yideng smiled and continued, "Later on don't even bother to come back here, since very soon we are going to move away."

“Where are you moving to?” Guo Jing hastily asked. Yideng smiled without say anything.

Huang Rong said in her heart, “Silly Brother, because their whereabouts has been discovered by us they will have to move away; how can he tell you?” She thought about how Yideng, master and disciples, had spent a lot of effort laboriously developing this place and now because of her they would have to abandon everything; she felt sorry and thought it would be difficult for her to pay back this kindness. No wonder the fisherman, the woodcutter, the farmer and the scholar did everything they could to prevent them from going up the mountain. Thinking of this she turned her gaze toward the four disciples, wanted to say something to express her apology and gratefulness but she could not find any appropriate words.

Suddenly Reverend Yideng’s countenance changed, his body swayed and he fell to the ground. The four disciples, along with Guo Jing and Huang Rong were extremely shocked; they rushed forward trying to help. They saw his face twitching like he was trying to suppress a great pain. The six of them were very anxious, they stood around with their hands hanging down, nobody dared to make any noise.

About the time needed to drink a cup of tea later Yideng’s face showed a faint smile, he said to Huang Rong, “Child, did your father personally make these Nine Flowered Jade Dew Pills?”

“He did not,” Huang Rong replied, “It was my martial brother Lu Chengfeng who made them according to my father’s secret recipe.”

“Have you ever heard your father said that these pills would be harmful if taken excessively?” Yideng asked further.

Huang Rong was stunned, she thought, "Is there something wrong with these Nine Flowered Jade Dew Pills?" She hastily said, "Father said the more the better; only because these pills were not easy to make, he did not want to take too much."

Yideng lowered his head and knitted his brows for half a day; finally he shook his head and said, "Your father can be considered a genius, but his actions are unpredictable; how can I guess what he is up to? Could it be that he was punishing your Martial Brother Lu by giving him a fake recipe? Or could it be that your Martial Brother Lu had a grudge against you and mixed some poison into the pills?"

Hearing the word 'poison' everybody called in alarm in one voice. "Shifu, are you poisoned?" the scholar asked.

Yideng smiled and said, "It's a good thing your Shishu [Martial (younger) Uncle] is here; even a more lethal poison won't kill anybody."

The four disciples could not hold their anger anymore, they cursed Huang Rong, "Our Shifu was so kind to save your life, but you have the guts to actually harm other with poison?" They surrounded Guo Jing and Huang Rong, ready to strike.

This turn of events happened so abruptly that Guo Jing was at a loss; he did not know the best action to take. Ever since Yideng's first question Huang Rong had correctly guessed that the Nine Flowered Jade Dew Pills had caused a disaster. Her mind quickly recalled the succession of events concerning these pills since she received them at the Cloud Manor [gui yun zhuang]; when she arrived at the thatched hut in the Black Marsh forest she remembered how Ying Gu brought the pills to the other room and examined them for quite some time before she re-appeared. Suddenly a

thought came into her mind like bright light. "Uncle, I know it!" she called out, "It was Ying Gu."

"It was Ying Gu?" Yideng asked.

Immediately Huang Rong told him everything that happened inside the thatched hut in the Black Marsh forest. She furthermore said, "She repeatedly warned me not to take any of these pills; apparently it was because she had already mixed some poison in them."

"Hmm," the farmer sneered angrily, "She was really good to you; she was afraid you might die."

Ever since she learned that Yideng was poisoned Huang Rong's heart was full of regrets; she did not feel like arguing. She lowered her head and said, "She was not afraid to kill me, but she was afraid that if I take the pill then Uncle would not be poisoned."

Yideng could only sigh, "Karma, karma," he said. His face turned gentle. He turned toward Guo Jing and Huang Rong and said, "This is the result of my own sin; it has nothing to do with you. It was that Ying Gu; and I am reaping what I sow. You go ahead and take some rest, then you can go down the mountain, there is no need to worry over me. Although I am poisoned, my martial brother is here and he is an expert in healing poison related sickness." He finished speaking; he closed his eyes and did not say another word.

Jing and Rong two people bowed. They saw Yideng's face showed a smile, he waved his hand lightly. Two people did not dare to tarry much longer, they slowly turned around and went out. The young monk was waiting outside, he led two people to rest at a small building in the rear courtyard. The little building was also empty except for a couple of bamboo couches and a small bamboo table. Not too long

afterwards two older monks came in with some vegetarian dishes; "Please eat," they said.

Huang Rong was still concerned over Yideng's condition. "Is Reverend well?" she asked.

"Xiao Seng [lowly monk] does not know," the old monk replied with a sharp voice. He bowed and went out the door.

"Listening to their voice I thought they were women," Guo Jing said.

"They are eunuchs," Huang Rong said, "They must be Emperor Duan's former attendants."

"Oh," Guo Jing muttered. Their minds were filled with concern, how could they eat?

The courtyard was secluded and very quiet, with light breeze occasionally stirred the bamboo leaves. After a long time Guo Jing broke the silence, "Rong'er, Reverend Yideng's martial art skill is very high.

"Hmm," Huang Rong mumbled. Guo Jing continued, "Our Shifu, your father, Zhou Dage [Big Brother Zhou], Ouyang Feng and Qiu Qianren, these five people's martial art is also high, but they won't necessarily superior to Reverend Yideng."

"In your opinion, which one among these six is the Number One in the world?" Huang Rong asked.

Guo Jing hesitated for half a day before answering, "I think each one of them has their strengths and weaknesses, it's really difficult to judge. This one is stronger than that one, yet that one is fiercer than this one."

“What about ‘wen wu quan cai’ [well versed in both literature and martial art]? Who’s the best?” Huang Rong asked.

“Without question your father is the best,” Guo Jing replied.

Huang Rong was very proud; she smiled showing her dimples, beautiful as flowers. But then suddenly she sighed and said, “That’s why it’s very strange.”

“What do you mean ‘strange’?” Guo Jing hastily asked.

“Just think about it,” Huang Rong replied, “Reverend Yideng has such high skill; the fisherman, the woodcutter, the farmer and the scholar, his four disciples’ skills are not superficial either. Why would they hide themselves in fear in this remote mountain? Why is it that every time they hear somebody’s coming they shiver in fear? Among those six experts, perhaps only Ouyang Feng and Qiu Iron Palm are their enemies; but they are people of high reputation. Could it be that they will disregard their ranks and join hands in making things difficult for him?”

“Rong’er,” Guo Jing said, “Even if Ouyang Feng and Qiu Qianren join hands to seek enmity, we don’t need to be scared.”

“How come?” Huang Rong asked in surprise. Guo Jing’s face showed embarrassment, he looked bashful. Huang Rong laughed, “Ah! Why are you embarrassed all of a sudden?”

Guo Jing answered, “Reverend Yideng’s martial art is not inferior to the Western Poison. To say the least they are even. I think his backhand acupoint sealing technique is the Toad Stance’s black star.”



“What about Qiu Qianren?” Huang Rong asked, “The fisherman, the woodcutter, the farmer and the scholar are certainly not his match.”

“That’s right,” Guo Jing said, “I have exchanged a palm with him at Dongting Lake, Mount Jun and the Iron Palm Peak. If it is fifty stances or less, I think I can fight him evenly; but after a hundred stances I don’t think I can block his attack. Today I saw the way Reverend Yideng’ acupoint sealing method to treat your injury ...”

Huang Rong was delighted, “You learned his skill? Now you can defeat that scoundrel Qiu the Iron Palm?” she interrupted.

“You know I am dim-witted,” Guo Jing said, “This acupoint sealing technique is so deep, how can I learn it? Moreover, Reverend did not pass the theory to me, naturally I can’t learn his skill. But looking at his technique, some things from the Nine Yin Manual that I did not understand before become clearer. Defeating him, I can’t do; but I believe I can hold against him for a moment longer.”

Huang Rong sighed, “Too bad you have forgotten one thing,” she said.

“What is it?” Guo Jing asked.

“That the Reverend is poisoned and we don’t know when he is going to be well,” Huang Rong replied.

Guo Jing was silent. After a while he hatefully said, “That Ying Gu is so evil.” Suddenly he called out, “Ah, this is bad!”

Huang Rong jumped up in surprise. “What is it?” she asked.

“You have promised Ying Gu that after your recovery you will accompany her for a year. Shall we fulfill this promise or not?” Guo Jing said.

“What do you say?” Huang Rong asked.

Guo Jing replied, “If she did not give us direction then we would not be able to find Reverend Yideng. It would be difficult to say what your injury’s condition will be ...”

“What would be difficult to say?” Huang Rong cut him off, “Just say it plainly that my little life could not be preserved. You are a gentleman whose words are as a mountain; you certainly want me to abide by mine.” She was thinking about how Guo Jing was not willing to cancel his engagement with Huazheng; she could not help dejectedly hang down her head.

Guo Jing did not have the slightest idea his girl was pouring out her heart’s contents; Huang Rong was on the verge of tears, but he was oblivious. He said, “Ying Gu said your father possesses divine mathematical skill and he is a hundred times superior to her. Let’s just say you are willing to teach her some mathematical skill, in the end it will still be difficult to her to even scratch your father’s skin; then why would she still want you to accompany her for a year?”

Huang Rong covered her face and did not answer. Guo Jing was indifferent, he repeated his question. Huang Rong was angry, “You are so dumb that you don’t know anything!” she scolded him.

Guo Jing did not understand why she suddenly lost her patience and scolded him; he could only scratch his head and said, “Rong’er! I am dumb, that’s why I am asking you to explain it to me.”

Huang Rong had already regretted her words as soon as they left her mouth, now listening to him meekly admitting his stupidity she could not hold herself any longer; she threw herself to his bosom and cried. Guo Jing became more confused than ever, he gently patted her back trying

to console her. Huang Rong pulled Guo Jing's sleeve and used it to wipe her tears. She smiled and said, "Jing Gege, I am the bad one; next time I certainly won't scold you anymore."

"I am dumb, so what's wrong with you saying it out loud?" Guo Jing said.

"Ay, you are a good man, I am a bad girl," Huang Rong said, "All right, let me tell you. That Ying Gu has an animosity against my father. She wants to learn mathematic so she can go to the Peach Blossom Island to seek revenge. Afterwards she found out that in mathematics she is inferior to me, in martial art she is inferior to you; she knew it was hopeless for her to seek revenge. Therefore, she wants to keep me as a hostage and tell my father to rescue me. This way from a guest she becomes the host and she can build a treacherous plan to harm him."

Suddenly Guo Jing understood; he slapped his thigh and said, "Ah, that's totally right! Then you don't have to fulfill your promise."

"What do you mean not fulfilling my promise? I have to fulfill my promise," Huang Rong said.

"Huh?" Guo Jing was puzzled.

Huang Rong said, "That Ying Gu is very crafty; just look at how she managed to mix some poison in the Nine Flowered Jade Dew Pills to harm Reverend Yideng. She could do the same again. If we don't get rid of her, this woman will become a thorn to my father in the future. She wants me to accompany her, I have to accompany her. Now that I know, I can guard against her craftiness. No matter what kind of treacherous plan she has, I am confident I can see through them one by one."

"Ay! But that is like you are living with a tiger," Guo Jing said.

Huang Rong was about to reply when suddenly they heard commotion from the direction of the house where Reverend Yideng was. Guo Jing and Huang Rong looked at each other. They strained their ears to listen closely, but it seemed like the commotion had ceased.

"I wonder how the Reverend is," Guo Jing said. Huang Rong shook her head. Guo Jing continued, "Eat something, and then you take a rest." Huang Rong shook her head again. Suddenly, "Somebody's coming!" she called out. And sure enough, they heard footsteps coming closer from the front courtyard.

"That little girl is so sly, we'll kill her first," an angry voice was heard; it was the farmer's voice.

Guo Jing and Huang Rong were startled. They also heard the woodcutter said, "Don't be rash, we need to ask them clearly first."

"What is there to ask?" the farmer said, "These two little thieves must be sent by Shifu's enemy. We kill one and let the other live. If we must ask, it's enough to ask that dumb kid." While talking, the fisherman, the woodcutter, the farmer and the scholar had arrived and stopped at the door. It looked like they were not afraid Jing and Rong two people would hear them.

Without hesitation Guo Jing launched the Proud Dragon Repents; his palm struck the wall behind them. With a loud rumbling noise a hole appeared on the earthen wall. He bent down to let Huang Rong climb on his back and swiftly jumped out the wall. While they were still airborne the farmer stretched out his hand, quick as the wind, trying to grab Guo Jing's leg.

Huang Rong's left hand swept lightly, brushing the 'yang chi' [positive pond] acupoint on the back of the farmer's palm. It was her family's 'lan hua fu xue shou' [brushing orchid acupoint sealing technique]. Although she was weakened from the injury her light and quick stroke floated with elegance, attacking the acupoint in a strange way; truly it was not a simple matter to parry.

The farmer was no stranger to sealing acupoint techniques; he saw her finger was lightning fast, he was shocked and hastily withdrew his hand to parry her attack. His acupoint was saved, but this attack had slowed his grab so that Guo Jing managed to jump out of the wall carrying Huang Rong on his back.

Guo Jing darted forward a few steps. Suddenly he called out in alarm, it turned out behind the buildings there were thorn bushes as tall as a person, dense and numerous, full of thorns covering quite a distance away; there was no way out through the bushes. He was forced to turn around and saw the fisherman, the woodcutter, the farmer and the scholar four people had arrived, blocking their way.

Guo Jing said with a clear voice, "The honorable master has given us permission to go down the mountain. You have heard it with your own ears. Why do you disobey his order and detain us here?"

The fisherman stared at them and with a thunderous voice said, "My master has shown you great mercy, willing to sacrifice his life to help you, but you ..."

Guo Jing and Huang Rong were shocked, "What do you mean sacrificing his life to help us?" they asked.

"Pei!" the fisherman and the farmer spat. The scholar sneered and said, "Our Shifu sacrificed his life to save Miss' life; do you really not know it?"

"We really don't know. We beg for your explanation," Guo Jing and Huang Rong asked in surprise.

The scholar saw their sincere faces; they did not seem to be pretending. He looked at the woodcutter and the woodcutter nodded. The scholar said, "Miss had suffered a very serious internal injury. It was necessary for Shifu to use both 'yi yang zhi' [Solitary Yang Finger] and 'xian tian gong' [inborn/innate strength/energy] to open up the eight main arteries' acupoints and cure the injury. Ever since the death of the Quanzhen Sect's founder Chongyang Zhenren [lit. true/real man, a respectful term to address a Taoist priest], only my Shifu knows the 'yi yang zhi' and 'xian tian gong', these two marvelous skills. But by treating injury in this manner, his own body will suffer a serious injury; he will lose all his martial arts for the next five years."

"Ah!" Huang Rong exclaimed, she felt more ashamed.

The scholar continued, "Hereafter for the next five years he will have to diligently and painstakingly re-cultivate his energy every day and night. If he makes the slightest mistake, not only his martial art will not recover, but he will at the least be paralyzed, at the most lose his life. My Shifu has shown such kindness to you; how could you be so heartless and repaid kindness with enmity?"

Huang Rong wriggled down and knelt on the ground, facing the house where Reverend Yideng was she kowtowed four times and sobbed, "Uncle has graciously saved my life; I didn't know your sacrifice was this deep."

The fisherman, the woodcutter, the farmer and the scholar saw her bowing down, their faces turned slightly softer. The fisherman asked, "Your father sent you over to harm our Shifu; and you really did not know it?"

Huang Rong was indignant, "How could my father send me to harm Uncle? My father, the Master of the Peach Blossom Island, is what kind of person? How could he commit such a despicable act?"

The fisherman cupped his fists and said, "If Miss was not sent by your father, then please forgive my offending words."

"Humph," Huang Rong snorted, "If my father heard you, even though you are Reverend Yideng's outstanding disciple, he would still make you eat a little bit of suffering."

The fisherman smiled and said, "He is known as the Eastern Heretic, his action ... his action ... hey, hey ... We thought what the Western Poison is able to do, your father can also do. Now it looks like we have thought erroneously."

Huang Rong said, "How can you compare my father with the Western Poison? What has that old thief Ouyang Feng done anyway?"

The scholar said, "All right, now everything is clear; let's go back to the house and talk some more."

Immediately six people returned to the meditation room and sat down. The fisherman, the woodcutter, the farmer and the scholar sat in such a way that they blocked the doors and windows. Huang Rong knew they were guarding against them escaping; she smiled slightly but did not expose her awareness.

"Do you know anything about the Nine Yin Manual?" the scholar asked.

"We do," Huang Rong replied, "But what does this Nine Yin Manual have to do with this matter? Ay, this book is really dangerous." She could not help but recall how her mother

had died due to over-exertion in re-writing the manual from memory.

The scholar said, "In the first Sword Meet of Mount Hua the Quanzhen Sect's founder was crowned the Number One Martial Artist of The World [wu gong tian xia di yi]; therefore, the manual fell into his hand. It went without saying that the other four experts felt a heartfelt admiration to him. In that Sword Meet of Mount Hua everybody demonstrated his marvelous strength; Chongyang Zhenren was impressed with my Shifu's Solitary Yang Finger. The following year he came to Dali accompanied by his Shidi [younger martial brother] to pay a visit and discuss martial art skills."

"His Shidi?" Huang Rong interrupted, "Isn't that the Old Urchin Zhou Botong?"

"That's correct," the scholar replied, "Miss is young, yet actually knows a lot of people."

"No need to praise me," Huang Rong said.

The scholar continued, "Zhou Shishu [Martial Uncle Zhou] was a very funny man, but I did not know he was called the Old Urchin. That time my Shifu had not become a monk."

"Ah," Huang Rong said, "He was still an emperor."

"Exactly," the scholar said, "The Quanzhen Sect's founder and his martial brother stayed for a dozen of days in the imperial palace, we four people were always by their side to accompany them. Our Shifu explained the essence of the Solitary Yang Finger and everything there is to know to Chongyang Zhenren. Chongyang Zhenren was completely delighted; in turn he bequeathed the fiercest 'xian tian gong' to our Shifu. We were at their sides when they were discussing these marvelous skills, but because our



experience and knowledge were shallow, we heard but did not comprehend anything.”

“What about the Old Urchin?” Huang Rong asked, “His martial art skill is not low.”

The scholar replied, “Zhou Shishu liked to move around and did not like to stay still. Several days in the Dali palace he wandered to the east and strolled to the west, he played around everywhere; even the empress and the concubines’ palaces did not escape his visits. The court eunuchs were aware he was the emperor’s honorable guest, so they did not do anything to stop him.” Huang Rong and Guo Jing were smiling.

The scholar continued, “Just before Chongyang Zhenren left he said to our Shifu, ‘Lately my chronic illness has come back to me; I don’t think I am going to live much longer. Fortunately I have found an heir to my ‘xian tian gong’; it will strengthen the Emperor’s Solitary Yang Finger. There will be somebody in this world who can control him. I won’t be afraid he would run amuck with unseemly behavior anymore.’ It was then that my Shifu understood that Chongyang Zhenren had traveled thousands of ‘li’s to the Dali with the sole purpose of bequeathing the ‘xian tian gong’ to Shifu so that after his death there would be somebody who can control the Western Poison Ouyang Feng. But because the Eastern Heretic, the Western Poison, the Southern Emperor, the Northern Beggar and the Central Divinity shared the honor of the present age, if he said he came to impart a skill, it would be disrespectful to my Shifu; therefore, he first asked my Shifu to teach him the Solitary Yang Finger, then in exchange he taught the ‘xian tian gong’. As Shifu understood his intention he was very grateful and straightaway he diligently trained the ‘xian tian gong’. Chongyang Zhenren did not live long after he learned the Solitary Yang Finger; he did not have time to

study thoroughly, and I heard he had not bequeathed it to any of his disciples. Later on there were some unfortunate events in our Dali kingdom; my Shifu's heart was broken. He shaved his head and became a monk."

Huang Rong thought, "Emperor Duan did not want to be an emperor anymore, but became a monk; this must be because of an enormously grieving matter. Others did not tell, it would be inconvenient to ask." Glancing sideways she saw Guo Jing was about to open his mouth to ask; hastily she signaled him with her eyes. "Oh!" Guo Jing muttered and closed his mouth.

The scholar's face turned dark; he was reminiscing over past events. After a while he opened his mouth and continued, "Somehow the news that Shifu was training the 'xian tian gong' leaked out. One day, my martial brother," he pointed toward the farmer, "received an order to go gather some medicinal herbs. He went to the 'ta xue shan' [Big Snow Mountain] at the western border of Yunnan; where somebody injured him using the Toad Stance."

"It must be the Old Poison," Huang Rong said.

"Who else but him?" the farmer angrily said, "First a young man unreasonably picked a fight with me; he said this Big Snow Mountain belonged to his family. He wouldn't let anybody trespass and gather herbs without authorization. The Big Snow Mountain spans thousands of 'li's; how could it belong to his family? Without a doubt this person was intentionally provoking me. I remembered Shifu's teaching to endure patiently; I was yielding to him over and over. Who would have thought that this young man got an inch and wanted a foot! He said he wanted me to kowtow to him 300 times before he let me go down the mountain. Finally I couldn't hold myself much longer and we fought. This young man's martial art was not bad, we fought for half a day

without anybody gaining an upper hand. Unexpectedly the Old Poison suddenly appeared from a valley and without saying anything struck out a palm and severely injured me. That young man then carried me on his back and brought me over to 'tian long si' [sky/heaven dragon temple] where Shifu stayed."

"Somebody had already avenged you," Huang Rong said, "This young master Ouyang was killed."

The farmer was angry, "Ah, he's dead. Who killed him?"

"Hey, somebody avenged you; why are you angry?" Huang Rong asked.

"I want to seek revenge myself, I want to kill him with my own hand," the farmer replied.

Huang Rong sighed, "Too bad you can't do that anymore."

"Who killed him?" the farmer asked.

"It was another bad person," Huang Rong replied, "His martial art was below young master Ouyang; but he used craftiness to kill him."

"Good riddance!" the scholar said, "Miss, do you know why Ouyang Feng injured my martial brother?"

"What's so difficult to guess?" Huang Rong said, "Based on Ouyang Feng's martial art, he could kill your martial brother with only one strike; but he only injured him severely and sent him to your Shifu's door. Undoubtedly he wanted the Reverend to waste his energy by treating his disciple's injury. You told me that this type of treatment would require a lot of internal strength; he would need five years to recover his energy. Then on the next Sword Meet of Mount Hua the Reverend would definitely not be able to compete."

“Miss is really smart,” the scholar sighed, “But your guess is only half-correct. That Ouyang Feng’s evil heart was difficult to fathom. After Shifu treated my martial brother’s injury, before Shifu recovered, he launched a secret attack with the intention of killing Shifu ...”

Guo Jing interrupted, “Reverend Yideng is so compassionate and kind, how could he have any enmity with Ouyang Feng?”

“Xiao Ge [little elder brother],” the scholar replied, “What you said is not right. First, merciful and compassionate good people do not coexist with sinister and ruthless evil people. Second, whenever Ouyang Feng wants to harm anybody, it really doesn’t matter whether that person has any enmity with him or not. Just because he knew that the ‘xian tian gong’ is the black star of his Toad Stance he must kill my Shifu with all possible means.”

Guo Jing nodded his head repeatedly; “Did the Reverend receive any harm from him?” he asked again.

The scholar replied, “Shifu saw through Ouyang Feng’s evil scheme as soon as he saw my martial brother’s injury; that very night we moved away and the Western Poison lost our track. We know he has failed once, he would not give up that easily. He has looked for us everywhere until finally he found this secret place of ours. After Shifu recovered his strength we martial brothers proposed to go to the White Camel Mountain and settled this account with the Western Poison, but Shifu prohibits us to take any revenge; we must not allow ourselves to create any trouble. With great difficulty we managed to live peacefully all these years, who would have thought that with your craftiness you managed to go up the mountain. We only know you are the Nine-fingered Divine Beggar’s disciples; we did not know you meant to do our Shifu harm, hence we did not stop you with

all of our strengths. Otherwise we would put our four lives at stake and in no way would allow you to enter the temple. Who would have thought that the man did not have any intention to harm the tiger, but the tiger is harming the man. Ay! In the end my Shifu still fall under your evil hands." Speaking thus his face turned fierce, with a tiger like power he slowly stood up. With a 'shua' sound the sword on his waist went out its sheath, glimmering cold, dazzling the eye.

The fisherman, the woodcutter and the farmer also stood up unsheathing their weapons, surrounding them from four directions. Huang Rong said, "I came to ask the Reverend to treat my injury, not knowing it would require all of the Reverend's strength that he would lose his internal energy for five years. There is poison in those pills; I was framed by somebody else. The Reverend has shown me this kind of mercy; even if I don't have a heart, I still will not repay kindness with evil."

With a stern voice the fisherman said, "Then why do you take advantage while Shifu's strength is gone and he is poisoned you lead the enemy going up the mountain?"

Jing and Rong two people were stunned, "We did not!" they said with a confused voice.

"You still deny it?" the fisherman said, "As soon as my Shifu is poisoned, the enemy delivered a jade bracelet on the foot of the mountain. If you did not scheme it ahead, how can there be such coincidence?"

"What jade bracelet?" Huang Rong asked.

The fisherman was angry, "You still act stupid!" The iron oars in his hands moved; the left oar swept horizontally, the right oar went down vertically, attacking both Guo Jing and Huang Rong.

Guo Jing was sitting side by side with Huang Rong on meditation mats on the floor. As he saw the oars arrive he leaped up with his right hand forming a hook brushing away the horizontally sweeping oar, while his left hand caught the flat of the oar and jerked it hard. This jerking action carried a very strong force; the fisherman felt pain and tingling sensation which forced him to let the oar go. Guo Jing pushed the oar forward. 'Bang!' it hit the farmer's iron rake; sparks flew everywhere. Immediately Guo Jing shoved the iron oar back into the fisherman's hand. The fisherman was surprised; he took the oar back. Exerting his strength to his right arm he struck down together with the woodcutter's axe.

Guo Jing's palm came one after another, carrying strong gusts of wind, coming fast toward the two men's torso. The scholar knew the fierceness of the '18-Dragon Subduing Palms', "Back off quickly!" he anxiously shouted.

Both the fisherman and the woodcutter were disciples of a well-known expert; their martial arts were anything but ordinary. Before Guo Jing's stance arrived they had hastily withdrew their weapons and leaped back. Suddenly they felt a jerk dampening their backward movement; turned out their weapons were pulled forward by Guo Jing's palm strength. They had no choice but let their weapons go; saving their own lives was more important.

Guo Jing caught the iron oar and the steel axe, he lightly tossed them back and called out, "Catch these!"

"Good martial art!" the scholar praised; his long sword threatening Guo Jing's right side.

Seeing this attack Guo Jing was startled; among Yideng's four disciples this scholar looked the most refined, but actually his martial art surpassed those of his colleagues;

hence Guo Jing did not dare to underestimate him. His palms fluttered in the air, enveloping Huang Rong and his own body with tremendous force. This defense was truly stable, like an abyss stopping a mountain peak; there was not a single hole in it. His palms were like rainbow, continuously circling around bigger and bigger that the fisherman, the woodcutter, the farmer and the scholar were gradually pushed back till their backs were against the wall. Never mind counterattacking, merely defending themselves was not easy.

By this time if Guo Jing added more force to his palms these four people would inevitably suffer injury. Fighting a moment longer Guo Jing held back his strength, he attacked hard then backed off hard, struck light then fended off light, it seemed like his force was there and then disappeared; throughout the battle he steadily held the power balance so they were on the level ground, nobody won and nobody lost.

The scholar's sword technique suddenly changed; his long sword vibrated, creating a continuously buzzing noise. His sword turned into six swords on the top, six swords on the bottom, six swords on the front, six swords on the back, six swords on the left and six swords on the right, successively stabbing like six by six, thirty six swords altogether. It was the Yunnan's 'ai lao shan' [Mount Ailao] thirty-six sword; considered one of the best offensive sword techniques in the world.

Guo Jing's left palm parried the fisherman, the woodcutter and the farmer three people's weapons; his right palm followed the movements of the scholar's sword: up and down, front to back, left to right. Although the sword underwent countless changes, Guo Jing had always succeeded in diverting the sword stab by the power of his palm. Each sword stab passed very close to his clothes, but

never once did it manage to even make a scratch on Guo Jing's skin.

Blocking to the thirty-sixth stab, Guo Jing bent his right middle finger under his thumb; he waited for the incoming sword to lose its momentum before he suddenly flicked the body of the sword. It was the 'tan zhi shen tong' [Divine Flicking Finger], Huang Yaoshi's special skill which was considered unparalleled in the present age. Huang Yaoshi used this special skill when he played shooting marbles with Zhou Botong; and again in the Cloud Village, when he was giving direction to Mei Chaofeng. Guo Jing watched him fighting the Quanzhen's Seven Masters at the Ox Village near Lin'an using this special skill. Having learned a certain amount of the martial art secrets from the Manual he managed to imitate the flicking finger technique. Although it was inferior to Huang Yaoshi's subtle and elegant flicking finger, but it still carried a tremendous force.

With a metallic clank the long sword was shaken; the scholar's arm was numb, the sword almost fell from his hand. The scholar was shocked; he leaped backward and called out, "Hold it!"

The fisherman, the woodcutter and the farmer three people leaped backward at once. Only their backs were very close to the wall to begin with, so there was no place they could withdraw to. The fisherman leaped out of the door, the farmer jumped out over the hole in the wall Guo Jing made earlier. The woodcutter inserted his axe back into his waist. He smiled and said, "I told you these two did not have any evil intentions, but you did not believe me."

The scholar put his sword back into its sheath; he cupped his fists toward Guo Jing and said, "Xiao Ge [little elder brother] has held back your palms, we are feeling grateful."



Guo Jing busily bowed down to return the gesture, but his heart was full of questions, "From the start we did not have any ill-intention; why didn't they believe us? Why is it after we fought they changed their minds and believed us?"

Huang Rong noticed his confused expression, she knew what he was thinking; she whispered to his ear, "If you harbor ill intentions, then you would have injured these four people. How can even Reverend Yideng be your match right now?" Guo Jing thought it was true, he nodded his head repeatedly.

The farmer and the fisherman walked back into the room. Huang Rong asked, "I wonder who the Reverend's enemy is? What is this jade bracelet that was delivered earlier?"

The scholar replied, "It's not that we don't want to tell you, but frankly speaking we don't even know the truth surrounding this matter. All I know is that the reason my Shifu became a monk is closely related to this matter."

Huang Rong was about to inquire further when suddenly the farmer jumped up and shouted, "Aiyo! It's dangerous!"

"What is it?" the fisherman asked.

The farmer pointed his finger to the scholar and said, "Shifu has lost all his strength, he is telling everything, concealing nothing; if these two harbor any ill intention while the four of us are powerless to hold them up, will Shifu be still alive?"

The woodcutter said, "The Honorable Zhuangyuan can predict with divine accuracy. If he could not predict the outcome of this small matter, how could he become the Dali's Prime Minister? He had known from the start that these two are friends and not foes; but he deliberately

proceeded with fighting them. First, to test these two friends' martial art; second, to convince the two of you."

The scholar showed a faint smile. The farmer and the fisherman looked at each other; they were partly admiring the scholar, partly blaming their own rashness.

At that moment they heard footsteps coming in from outside the door. A young monk came in. He clasped his hands and said, "Shifu orders four martial brothers to send the guests off." Everybody stood up immediately.

Guo Jing said, "The Reverend is expecting an enemy; how can we walk away just like that? Forgetting my own inability Xiao Di [little/lowly younger brother] wants to collaborate with the four martial brothers to face the visitor."

The fisherman, the woodcutter, the farmer and the scholar looked at each other with delighted expressions. "Let me ask Shifu," the scholar said.

Four people went in together. They stayed inside for quite a long time. When they came back out Guo Jing and Huang Rong saw their crestfallen expression and knew that Reverend Yideng did not allow them to help. And sure enough; the scholar said, "Shifu thanks the two of you very much; but he said that everybody reaps what he sows, other people must not interfere."

"Jing Gege," Huang Rong said, "Let us talk to the Reverend." They went to the building where Reverend Yideng's meditation house is. Guo Jing knocked the door for half a day but nobody answered. He could have shoved the door open, but how could he dare to play rough?

The woodcutter low-spiritedly said, "Shifu cannot receive the two of you. The mountain is high and the river is long, we will meet again some other time."

Guo Jing felt deeply grateful toward Reverend Yideng, his warm blood bubbling up his chest; he was unable to restrain himself, with a loud voice he said, "Rong'er, whether the Reverend allows us or not, let us go down the mountain. If we see anybody messing around, we'll beat the hell out of him first, then we'll talk."

"That is a wonderful idea," Huang Rong replied. "If the Reverend's enemy is so fierce that we die in his hands, consider that we are repaying the Reverend's kindness."

Guo Jing spoke with power, Huang Rong also intentionally raised her voice, of course Reverend Yideng heard them. They were just about to turn around when the wooden door suddenly opened. An old monk with a sharp voice said, "The Reverend invites you to come in."

Guo Jing was pleasantly surprised; alongside Huang Rong he walked into the room. Reverend Yideng and that Indian monk were still sitting cross-legged on the meditation mats just as before. Two people bowed down to the ground. They raised their heads and saw that Yideng's complexion was yellow and sickly; totally different from the first time they saw him. Two people's hearts were overwhelmed with gratitude and regret at the same time; they did not know what to say.

Yideng turned toward his four disciples on the door, "Everybody come in, I want to say something."

The fisherman, the woodcutter, the farmer and the scholar went inside the meditation room and paid their respects to their master and martial uncle. The Indian monk nodded his head to acknowledge, then he went back into his meditation, did not pay more attention to anybody. Reverend Yideng gazed at the rising incense smoke, he

seemed to be lost in thought; his hand played with a sheep-white colored jade bracelet.

Huang Rong thought, "It is obviously a woman's bracelet. I wonder what is Reverend's enemy's intention in sending it over?"

A moment later Yideng heaved a sigh and turned to Guo Jing and Huang Rong, "The Old Monk gratefully accepts your kind intention. This matter relates to a complicated cause and effect; if I did not talk, I am afraid there will be casualties on both sides, and that is not the Old Monk's original intention. Do you know what kind of man I was?"

"Uncle was the Emperor of the Dali country of Yunnan," Huang Rong replied, "The only emperor of the southern sky, with awe-inspiring power and prestige; who in this world has never heard about you?"

Yideng showed a faint smile. "Emperor is superficial, Old Monk is also superficial, awe-inspiring power and prestige is fake. You, a young miss, are also a fake."

Huang Rong did not understand his allegorical words; she stared at him with her bright, crystal clear beautiful eyes.

Yideng slowly continued, "My Dali kingdom was founded by the Emperor Shen Sheng Wen Wu Tai Zu [lit. divine/holy literature and martial art (or civil and military) great ancestor] in the year of Ding You. It was twenty-three years before the Great Song's founder, Zhao Kuangyin, Emperor Zhou staged a rebellion and assumed the throne of the Song Dynasty. Seven generation from the Emperor Shen Sheng Wen Wu, the throne was passed on to Emperor Bing Yi. He became an emperor for only four years before he became a monk, bequeathing the throne to his nephew, Emperor Sheng De. Following Emperor Sheng De were Emperor Xing Zong Xiao De, Emperor Bao Ding, Emperor

Xian Zong Xuan Ren, and then my father, Emperor Jing Zong Zheng Kang; all had become monks. From Tai Zu [great ancestor/founder] to me, there are eighteen emperors, among which seven had left their home [meaning: became monks].”

The fisherman, the woodcutter, the farmer and the scholar were people of Dali; naturally they knew their country’s history. But Guo Jing and Huang Rong felt strange, they thought, “Reverend Yideng did not want to become an emperor but became a monk instead was already surprising; turned out many of his ancestors had taken the same path. Could it be that being a monk is better than being an emperor?”

Reverend Yideng continued, “By divine providence our Duan family has been ruling with a great power over a small area ever since. Each generation realizes his own virtue and ability. In reality we all are insufficient to bear this heavy responsibility; hence all along we fulfill our duty with fear and trepidation, did not dare to overstep our boundary. Didn’t the emperors eat without plowing? Wearing clothes without weaving? Going out and coming in to the palace in a carriage? Are these not the common people’s blood and sweat? When the emperors reached their advance years their own hearts convicted them of all their merit and guilt; always enjoying the toil of the people while contributing only a few, how they have committed a multitude of sin while performing their office duty. Therefore, oftentimes they decided to abdicate their thrones and became monks.”

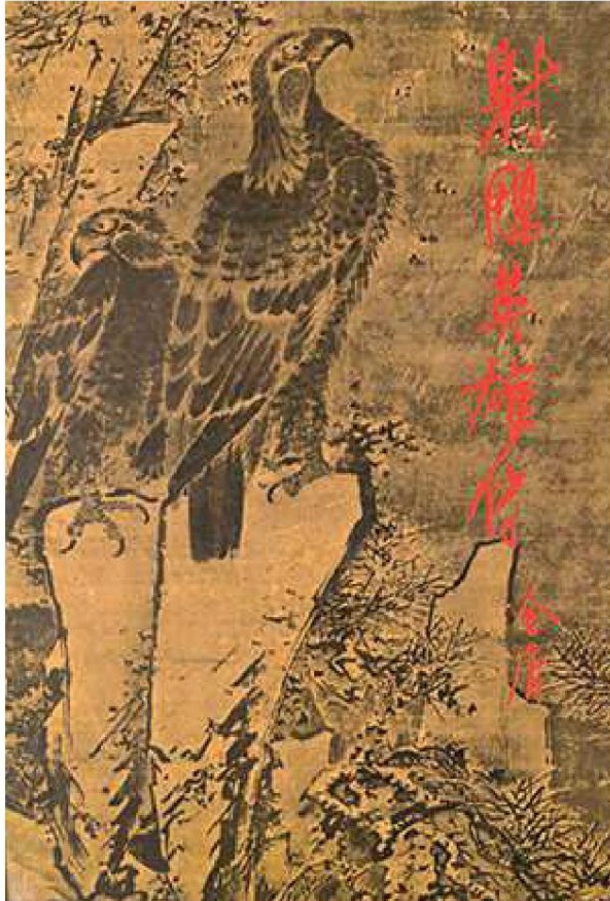
Speaking to this point he raised his head looking outside, the corners of his mouth revealed a smile, while his eyebrows showed a grieving heart. Six people listening silently, nobody dared to make any noise. Reverend Yideng raised up his left index finger with the jade bracelet on it.

He spun it around several times and said, "As for me, I did not become a monk for the same reason. Actually, it has something to do with the Sword Meet of Mount Hua, where we compete over the Manual. That year the Quanzhen Sect's founder, Chongyang Zhenren won the Manual. The following year he paid a visit to Dali, passing along the 'xian tian gong' to me. He stayed in my palace for about half a month. We were having the time of our lives discussing martial art. But his martial brother Zhou Botong was fidgety after about ten days of doing nothing; he roamed to the east and strolled to the west inside the palace, and had caused an incident."

Huang Rong said in her heart, "It would be strange indeed if the Old Urchin Zhou Botong did not create any trouble."

### **End of Book 3**

**She Diao Ying Xiong Chuan**  
**Eagle Shooting Hero Book 04**  
by  
**Jin Yong**



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# She Diao Ying Xiong Chuan Eagle Shooting Hero Book 04

by  
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Additionally, I would note that the work involved goes far beyond just translation.

Chinese cannot simply be directly translated to English, so am grateful for the notes explaining idioms in addition to notes on geography, culture and historical context.

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## Chapter 31 - Lovers' Handkerchief

Translated by Frans Soetomo



*Reverend Yideng narrated all kinds of gratitude and grudges, love and hate that he went through with Concubine Liu in the past. Guo Jing and*



*Huang Rong sat on the mediation mats in front of him, listening intently; while the 'Fisherman', 'Woodcutter', 'Farmer' and 'Scholar', his four disciples, stood behind Reverend Yideng.*

Reverend Yideng lowered his head and sighed, "Actually I only have myself to blame for this unfortunate disaster. You see, my Dali kingdom is small; although it cannot be compared to the Chinese emperor's palace where there are more than 3,000 women, speaking about the empress and concubines, I had a few. Ay! It truly was a sin. I was very fond of martial arts; very seldom did I come near a woman. Even my own empress could see me only once every few days; how much less time did I have for my concubines?"

Speaking to this point he said to his four disciples, "This is an inside story, you did not know the details before. Today I am going to tell you everything so you'll understand."

Huang Rong thought, "They really did not know it, they did not lie to me."

Yideng continued, "Day in and day out my concubines saw I train martial arts. Some were interested and expressed their desire to learn. So I casually gave directions to one or two of them. I thought by learning martial arts they would be healthier and might have a longer life. Among them a concubine surnamed Liu was the most gifted. She was so smart that each time I taught her something she would understand everything right off. She was young and she trained hard everyday; her martial art advanced greatly. And so it happened one day as she was practicing martial art in the garden she met Zhou Botong, Zhou Shixiong [Martial Brother Zhou] quite by accident. First of all Zhou Shixiong was crazy about martial arts; his natural disposition was also naïve, he did not guard against male-

female relationship. He saw Concubine Liu was training enthusiastically, immediately he came forward and sparred with her. Zhou Shixiong's martial art came from his martial brother, Wang Zhenren [lit. true/real man, a respectful term to address a Taoist priest]; how could Concubine Liu be his match ...?"

"Aiyo!" Huang Rong softly exclaimed, "He did not know whether his hand was light or heavy and has injured Concubine Liu?"

"Nobody was injured," Reverend Yideng answered, "Only about three moves or two stances later he sealed Concubine Liu's acupoint, and then he asked if she would admit defeat or not. Naturally Concubine Liu admitted defeat. Zhou Shixiong unsealed her acupoint. He was so proud of himself that he started to talk about the wonderful secret of sealing acupoint technique. Concubine Liu had actually asked me to teach her the acupoint sealing technique before; but just think about it: how could I pass on this profound martial art to an imperial concubine? What she heard from Zhou Shixiong was exactly what she desired. Immediately she respectfully asked him to teach her."

"(Sigh)! The Old Urchin must be very happy," Huang Rong said.

"You know Zhou Shixiong?" Yideng asked.

Huang Rong laughed, "We are old acquaintances; he stayed at the Peach Blossom Island for more than ten years, never once leave the island even for a single step."

"With his character, how can he stay that long?" Yideng wondered.

Huang Rong smiled, "My father imprisoned him, and he was released just recently."

"That's so," Yideng nodded his head, "Is Zhou Shixiong well?" he asked.

Huang Rong replied, "His body is well, but the older he gets the crazier he becomes. He doesn't have any manners." Pointing her finger to Guo Jing she pursed her lips and continued with a smile, "The Old Urchin has performed a ritual to become sworn brothers with him."

Reverend Yideng could not help smiling; then he continued, "The acupoint sealing technique is only taught by a father to his daughter, mother to her son, husband to his wife; other than that no man can teach a woman and no woman can teach a man ..."

"Why is that?" Huang Rong asked.

"Because male and female cannot be intimate," Yideng replied, "Just think, if we don't touch one's whole body acupoints one by one, how can we teach this skill?"

"But didn't you touch my whole body's acupoints?" Huang Rong asked.

The fisherman and the farmer was irritated she kept asking questions and diverting the story; they stared at her angrily. Huang Rong stared back at them and said, "What? Can't I ask any question?"

Yideng smiled, "You can, you can," he said, "You are a little girl, your life was in danger, of course we have to make an exception."

"All right, so be it," Huang Rong said, "And then what happened?"

Yideng continued, "And then one taught, the other learned. Zhou Shixiong was at the prime of his life, Concubine Liu was just coming of age; their flesh and skin touched each other everyday, before long their feelings grew and finally they created a problem which was very difficult to rectify ..."

Huang Rong wanted to ask; her lips were about to move but in the end she held back. She heard Yideng continue, "Some people came and reported to me. Although I was angry, I still honored Wang Zhenren's reputation, I pretended not to know. Who would have thought that after Wang Zhenren found out; he interrogated Zhou Shixiong and he did not conceal anything ..."

Huang Rong was unable to hold back much longer, she blurted out, "What is it? What is the problem that was difficult to rectify?"

Yideng temporarily at a loss of what to say, he hesitated before answering, "They really were not husband and wife, but they acted like one."

"Ah, I know," Huang Rong said, "The Old Urchin and Concubine Liu had a child."

"Ay! It's not that," Yideng said, "They had known each other only for about ten days, how could they have a child? After Wang Zhenren discovered this affair, he bound Zhou Shixiong's hands and took him to my presence for me to judge. We are martial art practitioners; we value loyalty above everything else, we did not put too much of a regard toward women. How could I injure our friendship over a woman? I immediately untied him and summoned Concubine Liu at the same time. I ordered them to get married. Who would have thought that Zhou Shixiong raised a clamor; he said he did not know what he did was

wrong, that if he knew, he would have not done it even if he were to be killed. No matter what, he was not willing to take Concubine Liu as his wife. At that time Wang Zhenren sighed and said, 'If I did not know any better, that he is a fool who doesn't know good from evil, a sword would have already cut him into two as he committed this awful crime.'

Huang Rong stuck out her tongue and said, "The Old Urchin was in a big trouble!"

Yideng continued, "At first I was offended, I said, 'Zhou Shixiong, I am sincerely willing to part with my treasure and give her to you, do you think I have another agenda? There is an ancient saying, 'Brothers are like hands and feet, wives are like clothes'; what is a woman for you to consider it a very big deal?"

"Pei! Pei!" Huang Rong spat, "Uncle, you disregarded women, what you said was a pile of rubbish!"

The farmer could not hold his patience any longer, he shouted, "Just shut up and don't talk nonsense, will you?"

"What he said was wrong, I must refute it," Huang Rong was adamant.

To the fisherman, the woodcutter, the farmer and the scholar, Reverend Yideng was not only their lord, but also their teacher. It never occurred to them to talk back, let alone refuting his words. They regarded him with utmost reverence; now hearing Huang Rong's unrestrained mouth they were shocked and angry at the same time.

Reverend Yideng actually did not seem to mind; he continued his narration, "As Zhou Shixiong heard me, he shook his head. I became angry, I said, 'If you love her, why don't you want her? If you don't love her, why did you do what you did? My Dali is a small country, but do you think

you can just drop in and throw an insult like this?’ Zhou Shixiong was silent for half a day. Suddenly he bent his knees and kowtowed to me several times; he said, ‘Emperor Duan, I am guilty. If you want to kill me, just do it, I won’t dare to hit you back.’ I was taken aback, I have never expected him to say such thing; I was at a loss momentarily. Finally I said, ‘How can I kill you?’ He said, ‘Then I am leaving!’ He took out an embroidered handkerchief from his bosom, handed it over to Concubine Liu and said, ‘I give it back to you.’ Concubine Liu smiled sadly, she did not take the handkerchief. Zhou Shixiong let the handkerchief go and it fell near my feet. Zhou Shixiong did not say anything else; he turned around and stormed out of the palace. It has been more than a dozen years and I haven’t heard anything about him ever since. Wang Zhenren apologized to me over and over again; and then he also left. I heard he passed away that autumn. Wang Zhenren was a brave and heroic man, there was nobody can be compared to him. Ay ...”

“Wang Zhenren’s martial art skill might be higher than yours,” Huang Rong said, “But speaking of bravery and heroic spirit, I think he did not necessarily exceed Uncle. He had accepted seven disciples and they are all just average, there is nothing special about them. Anyway, what happened to the embroidered handkerchief?”

The four disciples were annoyed that Huang Rong cared so much about trivial things like handkerchief or clothes; but they heard their master said, “I saw Concubine Liu was staring blankly, like her soul had left her. I was very angry; I picked up the handkerchief only to see a couple of embroidered mandarin ducks playing on the water. (Sigh), it was Concubine Liu’s gift to her lover. I laughed coldly. I then saw next to the pair of mandarin ducks there was a line of poem ...”

Huang Rong's heart was stirred, she hastily asked, "Was it, 'Four weaving machines, the weaving of mandarin ducks desiring to fly together right away'?"

With a stern voice the farmer shouted, "Even we do not know it, how did you know? Always talk nonsense and disturb the story!" Who would have thought that Reverend Yideng sighed and said, "It was indeed that poem; you knew it?" At his words the four disciples looked at each other in astonishment.

Guo Jing sprang up and called out, "I remember now! That day on the Peach Blossom Island Zhou Dage [Big Brother Zhou] was bitten by a venomous viper; he was delirious and he muttered this poem. It was, it was ... Four weaving machines, a pair on mandarin ducks, and some head turned white. Rong'er, how did it go? I can't remember it anymore."

With a low voice Huang Rong recited, "Four weaving machines, the weaving of mandarin ducks desires to fly together right away. It's a pity not yet old but the hair on the head has turned white. When the green spring grass ripples in the deepest of dawn's cold; standing face to face taking a bath wearing red clothes."

"Exactly!" Guo Jing slapped his thigh, "Zhou Dage once advised me against good-looking women; he said he had seen one and as a result he offended a good friend and provoked his Shige [elder martial brother] to anger. He also said don't ever let her touch your acupoints, otherwise you'll be covered with germs. Rong'er, he even urged me not to be good to you."

"Pei!" Huang Rong angrily spat, "Old Urchin! Next time I see him I am going to twist his ears!" Suddenly she giggled and said, "That day in Lin'an prefecture I teased him that

he wasn't able to find a wife; the Old Urchin sulked for half a day. Turned out it was because of this matter."

"When I heard Ying Gu recited this poem I thought I have heard it somewhere, but tried as I might, I could not remember where I heard it. Uh, Rong'er, how come Ying Gu also knew this poem?" Guo Jing said.

Huang sighed, "Ay, it's because Ying Gu is that Concubine Liu."

Among the four disciples, the scholar was the only one who had already guessed 50, 60%; the other three were extremely astonished, they turned toward their master at once. Yideng spoke in a low voice, "Miss is really smart; truly worthy to be Yao Xiong's [Brother Yao] daughter. Concubine Liu's first name was 'Ying'. That day I tossed the handkerchief to her, afterwards I no longer called for her. In my depression I neglected the affairs of the country; I trained martial art every day ..."

Huang Rong interrupted him again, "Uncle, do you know that you loved her very much in your heart? If you did not, you would not be so unhappy."

The four disciples was shocked at her audacity, "Miss!" angrily they called out in one voice.

"What?" Huang Rong said, "Did I say something wrong? Uncle, tell me, was I wrong?"

Yideng gloomily said, "Hereafter in more than half a year I have never called for Concubine Liu, but in my sleep I often dreamt of being with her. One evening I dreamt about her, at midnight I woke up; I could not hold my patience much longer and made up my mind to pay her a visit. I did not let the palace guards or the eunuchs know about my intention, quietly I went to her quarters, I wanted to know what she



was doing. As I arrived on top of her roof I heard a child was crying inside. (Sigh), outside the frost was thick and the wind was cold. I stood in shock for half a night and did not get down until it was dawn. Afterwards I caught a very serious illness.”

Huang Rong thought how he was revered as the emperor, yet in the middle of the night roaming around the palace roof to visit his own concubine; it was truly unusual. The four disciples also recalled their master’s sickness. It was not only very bad, but also took a long time to recover. All this time they wondered: with his profound martial art cold wind would not easily make him sick; even if he was sick, he should not take that long to recover. Only now did they know that it was more of a crushed spirit than a physical illness that he did not use his own internal strength to battle the sickness. She asked again, “Concubine Liu had given you a child; certainly it was good, wasn’t it? Uncle, why were you not happy?”

“Silly kid,” Yideng said, “It was Zhou Shixiong’s child.”

“But Zhou Shixiong had left for a long time,” Huang Rong said, “Could it be that he came back secretly to see her?”

“No,” Yideng replied, “Have you heard the phrase ‘ten-month pregnancy’?”

Huang Rong was suddenly enlightened, “Ah, I know! That child must look like the Old Urchin very much, with pointy ears and high nose; otherwise how did you know it was not your child?”

Reverend Yideng answered, “That is not necessarily so. I haven’t been intimate with Concubine Liu for some time, naturally the child wasn’t mine.”

Huang Rong seemed to understand but she did not understand, but she was aware it was not appropriate to keep asking questions, so she did not pursue further.

Meanwhile Yideng continued, "I was sick for more than half a year; after I recovered, I poured out my attention to internal strength cultivation to dispel boredom and no longer gave thought to this matter. One night about two years later I was meditating in my bedroom, suddenly the curtain on the door was raised and Concubine Liu rushed in. Outside the door a eunuch and two palace guards quickly tried to stop her, but wherever they went, they were struck away by her palm. I looked up and saw she was carrying the child on the crook of her elbow. She wore an extremely panic-stricken expression; she knelt down and cried loudly, she kowtowed in front of me and called out, 'I ask the Emperor to show mercy, to be infinitely compassionate and spare this child's life!' I stood up to take a look. That child's face was deep red; he was breathing heavily. I took him from her bosom to examine further and found out that five of his ribs were broken.

Concubine Liu wept, 'Emperor, your lowly concubine has committed a heinous crime worthy of ten thousands death; but I am asking the Emperor to spare this child's lowly life.' I was surprised to hear her, so I asked, 'What happened to the child?' But she kept knocking her head entreating me. I asked again, 'Who injured the child?' Concubine Liu did not answer but kept weeping, 'Please Emperor, show mercy to him.' I scratched my head in confusion. She said, 'If the Emperor bestowed death to me, I would not complain for even half a word, but this child ... this child ...'

'Who bestowed death to you?' I asked, 'How did the child get injured?' Concubine Liu looked up and with a trembling voice asked, 'So it wasn't the Emperor who sent a palace guard to kill this child?' I knew something was amiss, I

busily asked, 'So it was a palace guard who injured the child? Which slave did have so much guts?' Concubine Liu called out, 'Ah! It was not the Emperor's imperial edict, so the child's life can be saved!' After saying that she fainted and fell to the ground. I helped her up and put her on the bed; I also put the child down on her side. Only after about half a day later she finally awoke. She pulled my hand and weeping she told me what happened.

Turned out she was patting the child to put him to sleep that night, when suddenly from outside the window came a palace guard wearing a mask on his face. The guard pulled the child away and hit his back with a palm. Concubine Liu hurriedly went forward to stop him, but the guard shoved her away. Then his palm hit the child's chest. Finally he laughed a big laugh and jumped over the window. That palace guard's martial art skill was very high. She thought it was me who sent him to kill her son; she did not dare to pursue, but she came to my palace to entreat.

The more I heard her story the more amazed I became; I re-examined the child but I could not tell what kind of martial art caused the injury. All I can tell was that the child's 'dai mai' [waist arteries] were shaken and broken. That assassin's hands were lethal, but obviously he had shown mercy; the baby was so young and weak, but he was still breathing after two palm strikes. Immediately I went to her quarter to investigate, and sure enough, I found very faint tracks on the window sill and on the tile outside the window. I told Concubine Liu, 'This assassin's martial art skill is very high, especially his lightness kungfu; it was not a small matter. Apart from me there is no one with this kind of ability in the whole Dali kingdom.' Suddenly Concubine Liu called out in alarm, 'Could it be him? Why would he want to kill his own son?' After saying that her face turned ash gray."

Huang Rong also muttered in a low voice, "The Old Urchin couldn't be that bad, could he?"

Reverend Yideng said, "At that time I actually believed it was Zhou Shixiong. Other than him, who in this present age had that kind of ability, and who without any reason at all would injure a baby? I guessed he was not willing to leave an illegitimate child behind and became a disgrace in the Wulin world. After Concubine Liu uttered those words she was bashful and anxious, frightened and ashamed at the same time. She was at a loss. But suddenly she said, 'No, it definitely was not him! That laughter was not his!' I said, 'You were frightened, how could you hear clearly?' She replied, 'I will remember this laughter forever, even if I become a ghost I will still remember that laughter! No, it definitely was not him!'"

Listening to this part everybody suddenly felt a chill in the air, goose bumps appeared on their skins. Guo Jing and Huang Rong recalled Ying Gu's voice and demeanor; they imagined her facial expression when she said those words with clenched teeth, they could not help but shiver in fear.

Reverend Yideng continued, "I heard her so convinced, I believed her. But for the life of me I could not guess who the assassin was. I once thought it might be one of Wang Zhenren's disciples, maybe Ma Yu, Qiu Chuji or Wang Chuyi? Perhaps they were trying to save Quanzhen Sect's reputation that they took the thousands of 'li's journey to a remote place and kill to close someone's mouth ..."

Guo Jing's lips moved, he wanted to say something, but he did not dare to interrupt Reverend Yideng's story. Yideng saw it and said, "You want to say something? You may as well say it."

Guo Jing said, "Ma Daozhang [Taoist Priest Ma], Qiu Daozhang, they are all chivalrous heroes; they can't possibly do this thing."

"I have met Wang Chuyi at Mount Hua," Yideng said, "His conduct was alright, but I don't know about the other disciples. But if they could kill the baby with one palm, why did they leave the baby half dead and half alive?" He raised his head and turned his gaze toward the window, staring blankly. Obviously he had not been able to forget the unsolvable mystery of more than ten years ago. The meditation room was quiet. A moment later Yideng said, "All right, let's talk about that later ..."

Huang Rong suddenly exclaimed, "Without a doubt, it must be Ouyang Feng."

Yideng said, "Afterwards I also suspected him. But Ouyang Feng is a western region's man, he is big and tall; he is at least a head taller than average local men. Concubine Liu said that compared to average men, the assassin can be considered short."

"That's strange," Huang Rong said.

"My thought precisely," Yideng said, "Concubine Liu was hugging the child and sobbing. This child's injury was not as severe as Miss Huang's, but he was very young; he did not have any immune system yet. If I was to treat his injury, it would have consumed all my energy. I hesitated for a long time. I saw Concubine Liu was crying pitifully. Several times I was going to open my mouth to tell her that I would treat his injury, but every time I remembered that if I do that, I can forget about competing against the other experts at the incoming second Sword Meet of Mount Hua to win the Nine Yin Manual. Ay! Wang Zhenren had said that this Manual was the Wulin world's big root of trouble; it brought harms

to many people and brought out the worst of human's heart. He was absolutely right. Because of that book I lost my compassion towards others. After hesitating for almost two hours I finally started to lean toward treating his injury. Ay, during these two hours I felt like I was lower than an animal. The worst part was, my decision to treat his injury was not because I wanted to do something good, but because I was tired of Concubine Liu's constant cry for help."

"Uncle," Huang Rong said, "I said you loved her very much, I was not wrong."

Yideng did not seem to hear her, he simply continued his narration, "As Concubine Liu heard my promise to help, she was so happy that she fainted again. I massaged her acupoint to awaken her, then I started to untie the child's swaddling clothes so that I could massage his acupoints using the 'xian tian gong' [inborn/innate energy]. Who would have thought that under the swaddling clothes that child was wearing a 'du dou' [an undergarment covering chest and abdomen] on his chest. I stopped on my track, unable to say anything; because on the 'du dou' was a pair of embroidered mandarin ducks, and next to the ducks was that 'four weaving machines' poem. Turned out this 'du dou' was the handkerchief given to Zhou Shixiong a couple of years ago.

Concubine Liu saw my expression and she knew things had turned bad for her. Her face was ashen. Clenching her teeth she pulled a dagger from her waist and pointed it toward her own chest. 'Emperor,' she called out, 'I do not have any face to live longer in this world. I am asking your infinite mercy and compassion, I am willing to trade my life for the child's. In my next life I will become a dog or a horse to repay your kindness.' As she said that she pushed the dagger into her chest, hard." Although everybody knew

that Concubine Liu was still alive, they could not help but gasp in horror.

As he narrated this part, it was as if Reverend Yideng did not tell the past events to others, but it seemed like he was simply thinking out loud, "I quickly used 'qin na fa' [grappling, capture and seize technique] to snatch her dagger away. I was fast, but her dagger had already penetrated her chest. Blood was seeping out her clothes. I was afraid she might try to kill herself again, so I sealed the acupoints on her hands and feet. I tended the wound on her chest and let her rest on a chair. She did not say anything, but her eyes looked at me full of sorrow. Neither of us said anything. The room was quiet, save the sound of that child gasping for breath.

While listening to that child's breathing many, many past events flashed in my mind: how she entered the palace for the first time, how I taught her martial art, how I had loved her. She had always revered me, feared me, gently attended to all my needs, never dared to disregard my will; but she had never loved me. At first I was not aware of her true feelings, but that day I saw the way she looked at Zhou Shixiong, then I understood. When a woman truly and wholeheartedly loves a man, she will look at him with that kind of look. I remembered the way she looked when Zhou Shixiong threw that handkerchief down, the way she looked when he turned around and left the palace. That scene had haunted me for several years, made my sleeps restless and my meals taste like sawdust. Even today I can still see it vividly in my mind.

This time once again her heart was broken; not over her lover, but over her son, whose life she was willing to trade her own with! I am an honorable man, and I felt disgraced. Me, the ruler of a country! Having this thought my heart was filled with fury; I lifted my foot and smashed an ivory

stool in front of me. I looked up and was dumbstruck. I said, 'You ... what happened to your head?' She did not seem to hear me, her gaze was fixed to her child. I have never really understood before, how someone's gaze could contain so much love, so much compassion. By that time she had realized I was not going to save her child's life, so she wanted to look at him as long as he was still alive.

I took a mirror and held it out in front of her. I said, 'Look at your hair!' In just a short period of time it seemed like she had become several decades older. She was only eighteen, nineteen years old; yet because of fear, anxiety, remorse, despair, grieve, and all kinds of deep emotional attacks innumerable hair on her temples had turned white!

She did not seem to care toward the change in her appearance. She blamed the mirror to be in the way, obstructing her view to the child. 'The mirror, take it away!' she said, candidly. She had forgotten that I was the Emperor, her master. I felt strange; I thought she had always treasured her own looks, why didn't she pay any attention to it now? I tossed the mirror aside only to see without blinking her gaze was fixed on the child. I had never seen such gaze; full of love and hope, a hope that her child would live. I understood that if she could, she would gladly take her own soul and put it inside her child's body to replace his slowly departing soul."

Listening to this Guo Jing and Huang Rong looked at each other; both were thinking in their hearts, "When I was seriously injured and there was little hope for it to be healed you also looked at me that way." Forgetting their surroundings they held out their hands to hold each other. Two hearts beating as one; they felt warmth creeping up their bodies. Amidst listening to how others were grieving of misfortune they could not help of thinking their own good fortune; due to the fact that their loved one was sitting



right next to them at that time, that place. Because her injury had been healed; she would not die. Yes, she would not die. In these two youngsters' hearts their loved one would not die forever.

They heard Reverend Yideng continue, "I could not take it much longer; several times I wanted to just take the child and treat his injury, but I kept looking at that handkerchief wrapped around the child's chest. The handkerchief with a pair of mandarin ducks embroidered on it, their necks intertwined with each other. The mandarin ducks had white heads, symbolizing they would grow old together. But why it was written, 'It's a pity not yet old but the hair on the head has turned white.'? As I turned my head I saw the hair on her temples had turned white, I broke in cold sweats. At that time my heart turned hard, I said, 'Fine, go ahead and grow old together; just leave me lonely and cast away in this palace as an emperor! This is you and your lover's child; why would I sacrifice my whole energy to revive him?'

She looked at me, her last glance. It was full of blame and hatred. Afterwards she had never looked at me anymore, but this one look I will not forget till the day I die. She coldly said, 'Let me go, I want to hold my child!' She was speaking with authority and determination; it was as if she was my master, made it difficult for me to disobey. Thereupon I unsealed her acupoints.

She held the child in her bosom. The child was so much in pain that he wanted to cry, but no sound came out of his tiny lips. His small face had turned purple; he looked at his mother as if asking her to help him. I was so hard-hearted; I did not have the least bit of compassion. I saw one by one her black hair had turned to ash grey, and from ash grey to white. I don't know whether it really did happen, or it was my imagination playing tricks on me.

I heard her gently saying, 'Child, Mama does not have the ability to save you, but Mama also can't let you suffer. Child, have a peaceful rest. Sleep Child, sleep. Don't wake up forever!' I heard she sang a gentle lullaby. It was a very beautiful song. It went like this, 'hmm, hmm ...' Listen!"

Everybody heard him say those words, but actually they did not hear the least bit of a song. They looked at each other in bewilderment.

"Shifu," the scholar said, "You have talked long enough, you must be tired. Please take a rest."

Reverend Yideng did not seem to hear, he kept talking, "The child's face showed a faint happiness, but the pain made his whole body spasm. With a gentle voice she said, 'My precious, my heart and my soul, sleep tight, then you won't feel the pain anymore, not the least bit of pain!' Suddenly 'stab!', her dagger went straight into the child's heart."

Huang Rong screamed in fright; she grabbed Guo Jing's arm tightly. The rest of the listeners were also so shocked that their faces did not show any trace of blood.

Reverend Yideng was oblivious to his surroundings, he continued, "I was so shocked that I cried out and drew back several steps, almost tumbled down. My heart was in turmoil, I was totally at a loss. I saw her slowly stand up and in a low voice she said, 'There will come a day, I will stab your heart with this dagger.' She pointed her finger to the jade bracelet on her wrist and said, 'You gave this to me the day I entered the palace. Just wait, the day I return this jade bracelet to you, will be the day my dagger will follow!'"

Speaking to this point Yideng spun the jade bracelet on his forefinger one time; he showed a faint smile and said, "This is the jade bracelet, I have waited several years for this. At last that day has come."

"Uncle," Huang Rong said, "She killed her own son, what did it have to do with you? You did not injure her child. Moreover, she had used poison trying to kill you; what enmity she had for you had been paid in full. I am going down the mountain to send her off, I won't allow her to create any disturbance here ..."

She had not finished her words when that young monk came rushing in. "Shifu," he said, "Somebody delivered this at the foot of the mountain." He held out both hands to present a small cloth bundle to his master.

Yideng took the bundle and unwrapped it. Everybody called out in alarm as one voice. Turned out inside that bundle was the 'du dou' made of the embroidered handkerchief. The silk had turned yellow of age, but the embroidered mandarin ducks were still bright as new. There was a knife hole in between the ducks; the edge of the hole was black from the bloodstain. Yideng stared blankly at the 'du dou', overwhelmed with grief. After a long time he finally said, "The weaving of mandarin ducks desiring to fly together right away, hey, desiring to fly together; in the end it was just a dream. She hugged her child's lifeless body tightly, uttered a long laugh, and jumped over the window sill, flew out of the room and in the blink of an eye disappeared without any trace. I couldn't drink, I couldn't eat, and was miserable for three days and three nights. Finally I came to my senses. I bequeathed the throne to my eldest son and decided to tread the immortal path by becoming a monk." He pointed at his four disciples and said, "They have followed me for a long time and did not want to leave me. Together we went out of the Dali city wall and lived at the 'tian long si' [celestial dragon temple]. For the first three years they took turns in helping my son to run the country. Later my son has understood the government affairs; the kingdom was at peace and nothing serious happened. So

we went to the Big Snow Mountain to gather medicinal herbs. There Ouyang Feng injured my disciple and we moved to this place. We have never gone back to Dali ever since.

I was so hard-hearted that I was not willing to save that child's life. Hereafter for the last ten years or so, day and night I have never had a peaceful rest. I always hoped to save many people to redeem my great sin. They did not know my miserable inner feeling, so they always tried to hinder me. Ay, even if I could save thousand people, ten thousand people, that child would still be dead. How else would I repay his life if not with my own? Everyday I have been waiting for Ying Gu, waiting for her to stab her dagger into my heart. I was afraid she might come here too late; I am already dead, then it would be difficult to redeem my sin. Good, finally she will be here. Why would she mix the poison into the Nine-flowered Jade Dew Pills? If I knew she would arrive soon after she poisoned me, I wouldn't have wasted these past several hours trying to survive, also my martial brother would not need to waste his divine power to neutralize the poison."

Huang Rong indignantly said, "This woman's heart is so evil! She had found out Uncle's dwelling early on, but was afraid that her own martial art would be insufficient; so she deliberately waited for a good opportunity. Coincidentally she met me, suffering the Iron Palm injury, so she guided me to seek your help. She wanted to employ two methods to achieve one goal; first she wanted you to waste your strength, then to seize that opportunity to poison you. I was so gullible to become the unaware weapon of this wicked woman. Uncle, how did Ouyang Feng's drawing ended up in her hand? What does this drawing have to do with her?"

Reverend Yideng took The Great Buddhist Scripture from the small table beside him, turned several pages and

started to read, "The story of the picture is originated from an ancient Indian city: Once there was a king, his name was Shipi. He was a diligent ascetic practitioner, always followed the way of the true enlightenment. One day there was a hawk chasing a pigeon. The pigeon flew in and hid underneath Shipi's arm, seeking refuge. The hawk demanded the king to return the pigeon to him, he said, 'If the king saves the pigeon, the hawk will die of starvation.' The king realized he could not save one without harming the other. Thereupon he took a knife and cut his own flesh for the hawk. The hawk said, 'If the king cuts his own flesh, it must be the same weight as the pigeon.' Shipi ordered his guard to fetch a balance. He placed the pigeon on one end and his flesh on the other; but no matter how much he cut his flesh, the pigeon end was still low. The king cut his chest, his back, his arm, his side, but the pigeon was still heavier. Finally he put his whole body onto the balance. Right away the earth shook; music came from the sky, the deities scattered flowers and sweet fragrance filled the whole earth. The dragons, the demons and all heavenly creatures sighed, 'Shan zai, shan zai [lit. good, peace], there has never been this kind of bravery.'" It was only a myth, but Yideng narrated it full of compassion and mercy, and the audience's hearts were moved.

"Uncle," Huang Rong said, "She was afraid you might not be willing to treat my injury, so she used this picture to move your heart."

Yideng smiled and said, "It seemed that way. When she left Dali that day, her heart was set on seeking revenge, so it seems logical for her to roam the Jianghu [lit. rivers and lakes] to learn martial art from a highly skilled person. Some way or another she met Ouyang Feng, and as Ouyang Feng learned about her intention he helped her plan this scheme, he drew this picture and gave it to her. This book is

well-spread in the western region, and Ouyang Feng is from the western region, so he must be familiar with this story.”

Full of hatred Huang Rong said, “The Old Poison used Ying Gu, in turn Ying Gu used me. This is an evil plan of murder with a borrowed knife.”

Yideng sighed, “You don’t need to be upset. If you had not met her, she would injure someone else and send that person to me to be treated. Only if that person does not have a highly skilled escort, he won’t be able to go up the mountain easily. Ouyang Feng must have drawn this picture a long time ago; they have been setting up this plan for at least ten years. Contrary to their expectation, they were unable to find someone for ten years; that is also because of fate.”

“Uncle, I know it,” Huang Rong said, “She has something else in her mind which is more important than harming you.”

“Ah!” Yideng exclaimed, “What matter?”

Huang Rong replied, “The Old Urchin was imprisoned by my father on the Peach Blossom Island. She wanted to help him out.” And then Huang Rong told him how Ying Gu painstakingly learned ‘qi men’ [strange/wonderful/mysterious gate] and mathematics. Finally she said, “Afterwards she found out that even if she studied for a hundred years more it would still be difficult for her to overcome my father, plus she saw me getting injured, thereupon ...”

Yideng uttered a long laugh; he stood up and said, “Fine, fine. All’s well that ends well. Everything has come together. Today finally she will get her wish.” With a calm face he turned to his four disciples and said, “You go and welcome Concubine Liu, no, welcome Ying Gu and take her up the

mountain. You must not utter even half a word of disrespect." As if by prior agreement the four disciples bowed to the ground and cried, they called out together, "Shifu!"

Yideng sighed, "You have followed me for many, many years, don't you understand your Shifu's heart?" Toward Guo Jing and Huang Rong he said, "I am asking you two a favor."

Jing and Rong answered together, "Just say it, we won't dare to disobey."

"Good," Yideng said, "Now I want you to go down the mountain. All my life I owed Ying Gu a lot. In the future, whenever she is facing a difficulty or is in danger, I am asking you for the Old Monk's sake, to lend a hand as much as you can. If you two can help in the matter of successful conclusion of her and Zhou Shixiong's affair, the Old Monk will be forever grateful."

Guo Jing and Huang Rong looked at each other in astonishment; they did not dare to reply. Yideng saw those two were silent, he pressed again, "This Old Monk's request, is it difficult for you to give your consent?"

Huang Rong reluctantly replied, "Since Uncle has asked, we will obey." She tugged Guo Jing's sleeve and bowed down to bid farewell.

"You don't have to meet Ying Gu," Yideng said, "Go down from the back of the mountain."

Huang Rong gave her reply, pulled Guo Jing's hand and turned around to go. The four disciples saw she appeared calm without any trace of grief, they secretly scolded her as cold-hearted and mean, seeing her savior was facing danger she was indifferent and walked away. Guo Jing knew

Huang Rong would not rest before she cooked another plan, so he followed her out.

When they got to the door Huang Rong whispered something in his ear. Guo Jing looked hesitant but finally he nodded his head. He turned around and slowly walked back.

Yideng said, "Your heart is honest and upright, you will accomplish great things in the future. I am entrusting Ying Gu's business to you."

"Very well!" Guo Jing replied, "Junior will do my utmost to tend to the Reverend's business." Suddenly he reached backward and grabbed the Indian Monk's hand sitting next to Yideng. Guo Jing's left hand went straight and hit his 'hua gai' [fancy canopy] and 'tian zhu' [heaven's pillar] two main acupoints. These acupoints were located one on the hand, the other on the foot; once they were sealed then four limbs would be immobilized. This move totally took Yideng and his four disciples by surprise; they called out, "What are you doing?"

Guo Jing did not reply, his left hand went straight toward Yideng's shoulder. Yideng's right palm made a turn and fast as lightning grabbed Guo Jing's left hand. Guo Jing was startled; he thought Yideng was already shrouded inside his palm's strength, unexpectedly not only he managed to break through but launched a counterattack as well. Moreover, Yideng's attack was targeting his vital point. It was truly an exquisite skill. Only as Yideng's palm came within an inch of his hand he could feel Yideng's palm was weak. Guo Jing took this opportunity to turn his palm around to protect his hand, while his right hand launched 'Divine Dragon Swings Its Tail' to repel the fisherman and the woodcutter who attacked him from behind. The forefinger of his left hand was still moving straight forward



to seal the 'feng wei' [phoenix's tail] and 'jing cu' [near energy] on Yideng's side. "Uncle," he said, "I beg your forgiveness."

Meanwhile Huang Rong had pushed the farmer out of the door using the Dog Beating Stick technique. The scholar was surprised with this abrupt turn of events; he did not understand Guo Jing and Huang Rong's intention. "If you have something to discuss, say it; please don't fight!" he repeatedly shouted.

Seeing his Shifu's condition the farmer was like a mad tiger; neglecting his own life he charged toward the meditation room. But the Dog Beating Stick was too much for him, he charged three times and three times Huang Rong's stick pushed him back.

Guo Jing's palms moved in circles with a strong gust of wind, forcing the fisherman, the woodcutter and the scholar to move back step by step toward the door. Huang Rong abruptly swung her stick from the ground upward to the farmer's eyebrow. This move was so swift that the farmer cried out, "Aiyo!" He threw his head backward and leaped back several feet.

"Good!" Huang Rong exclaimed. She reached backward and closed the door. With a chuckle she said, "Gentlemen, please hold your hands! I have something to say."

Every time the woodcutter and the fisherman met with Guo Jing's palm they felt their arms went numb and their feet staggered. They saw Guo Jing was about to strike again, quickly they stood side by side, ready to receive Guo Jing's palm with their combine forces. As Guo Jing heard Huang Rong's words he stopped his palm midway and withdrew it back. Cupping his fists he said, "Please forgive my offense."

The fisherman, the woodcutter, the farmer and the scholar looked at each other in consternation. With a serious face Huang Rong said, "I have received Honorable Master's kindness; now I know that Honorable Master is facing a difficulty, how can I just leave and do nothing? We have offended you with the intention to help."

The scholar stepped forward, bowed deeply and said, "The enemy is our Master's wife; it would be inconvenient for us to offend her. If she wants to go up the mountain, we won't have any way of stopping her. Moreover, ever since that ... that young master died, for more than ten years our Shifu's heart was restless. Even if his energy were still intact and he were not poisoned, when he saw Concubine Liu arrive he would not defend himself against her dagger. We cannot disobey our master, yet our hearts are burning with anxiety. We have exhausted our wisdom and used up all our strengths, still we don't know what to do. Miss is so smart; if you can show us a way, even if our bodies and bones are ground to dust we will wish to repay your kindness."

Hearing him speaking earnestly Huang Rong did not dare to joke around like she previously did, she said, "We, martial brother and sister, are very grateful for the Honorable Master's kindness, no different than the four of you, we will use all means possible to help. It will be best if we can prevent Ying Gu from entering the meditation room, but to think that she has been waiting patiently at the Black Marsh for more than ten years, she must have made ample preparation. I am afraid it won't be easy to block her. Little sister's plan involves a great danger. If we succeed, we can expect smooth sailing in the future, without any imminent trouble. But it is extremely risky, that Ying Gu is very astute and sly, her martial art skill is also high, so there is a possibility for failure. My ability and wisdom is very shallow and simple, I can't think of any foolproof plan."

The fisherman, the woodcutter, the farmer and the scholar said, "We beg your explanation."

Huang Rong raised her pretty eyebrows and laid down her plan. As the four disciples listened to it, they looked at each other and did not say anything for half a day.

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It was the tenth hour (5 - 7 pm), the sun slowly sank behind the mountain. The strong mountain breeze swayed the leaves of the palm trees planted in rows outside the meditation courtyard. The withered lotus leaves on the pond also made a rustling noise. The evening sun cast its light from behind the mountain peaks, the mountain ridges looked like a silhouette of a giant reclining on the ground. The fisherman, the woodcutter, the farmer and the scholar sat cross-legged on the ground by the stone bridge. They opened their eyes wide looking to the front. Each heart was heavy with restlessness.

They had waited for a long time. The sky had darkened, the dusk gradually turned into night. The crows crowed while they were flying in the valley below. A thin white mist rose up from the canyon below. But still no one appeared from the turn at the mountain cliff beyond the stone bridge. The fisherman thought, "If only Concubine Liu has a sudden change of heart and does not blame Shifu, maybe she reined her horse beyond the cliff and decided not to come over ..."

The woodcutter thought, "This Concubine Liu is very crafty; she must have been preparing a really sinister plot."

The farmer was more anxious and impatient than the others, he thought, "The sooner she arrives, the sooner we can get it over with; whether it will be disaster or fortune,

good or evil, we will find out sooner. She said she would come and she hasn't arrived yet, it really is exasperating."

The scholar thought, "The more delayed she is, the more dangerous the threat will be. This matter is really difficult to be solved nicely." It goes without saying that he was a good schemer and tactician; he had been the prime minister of Dali kingdom for more than a dozen of years. He had seen major battle and faced many difficult situations, yet this time he was nervous. He had given this matter a lot of thoughts, but could not put out the least bit of idea. His eyes scanned the darkened surrounding area; his ears heard the distant cry of an owl. Suddenly he remembered when he was a child he often heard people say, 'The owl [lit. night cat] hides in a secret place and stealthily counts human's eyebrows. Whoever got his eyebrows counted correctly, that person will not live to see the daylight.' It was obviously a myth to deceive little children, but in this situation suddenly hearing the cry of the owl, he involuntarily shuddered. "Could it be that Shifu won't be able to escape this disaster and die under this woman's hands?" He had just finished his thought when suddenly the woodcutter whispered urgently with a trembling voice, "She is here!"

The scholar lifted his head and saw a black shadow flew across the stone bridge and light as a feather jumped over the gap, as if floating without exerting any energy at all. The four people were astonished, "When she started training with Shifu, we have already been under his tutelage for a long time. How can her martial art exceed ours? In this last dozen of years or so, where did she go to learn such a marvelous skill?" they thought. As they saw that dark shadow come near, four people stood up and positioned themselves on either side of the way.

In a blink of an eye that dark shadow has arrived at the end of the stone bridge; she was wearing black clothes, and her facial features could be vaguely recognized as Concubine Liu whom the Emperor Duan loved very much in the years past.

Four people knelt down and kowtowed, "Xiao Ren [little/lowly people] greets Niang-niang [madam, or in this case can be translated as 'empress']."

"Humph," Ying Gu snorted. Her gaze swept the four people's faces and she said, "What Niang-niang? Concubine Liu had died long ago, I am Ying Gu. Hmm, the Prime Minister, the General, the Admiral, and the Commanding Officer of the 'yu lin jun' [lit. defending woods troops. I am not sure, but I think 'yu lin jun' is the personal bodyguards of the emperor] are all here. I thought the Emperor had forsaken worldliness and became a monk, who would have thought that he is hiding in this remote mountain and lives in peace and security as an emperor." Her voice carried so much hatred that their hearts trembled.

The scholar said, "The Emperor does not look like his former self. I am sure Niang-niang will not recognize him anymore."

Ying Gu laughed a cold laugh, "You keep saying Niang-niang this and Niang-niang that; are you mocking me? You are stiffly sitting on your knees down here, are you wishing me dead?"

The fisherman, the woodcutter, the farmer and the scholar looked at each other and then they stood up. "Your servants wish for your health," they said.

Ying Gu waved her hand, "The Emperor ordered you to stop me here, do you still have to perform this empty obeisance? If you want to fight, then just fight. You are lords and

royalties, I don't know how many common people you have harmed; why would you still pretend in front of an ordinary woman like me?"

The scholar said, "Our Emperor loves the people like his children, full of generosity and benevolence, the common people of Dali country still praise him even until today. Our Emperor not only has never harmed the innocent all his life, even toward criminal with grave offense oftentimes he bestowed abundant favor. Doesn't Niang-niang know?"

Ying Gu's face turned red, with stern voice she said, "Do you dare to offend me?"

"Wei chen [lowly officer] doesn't dare," the scholar replied.

Ying Gu said, "With your mouth you acknowledge me as your superior, but in your heart how can you still think there is any royalty-officer relationship between us? I want to see Duan Zhixing; will you let me or will you not?"

'Duan Zhixing' was Reverend Yideng's given name. Although the fisherman, the woodcutter, the farmer and the scholar knew it, they never dared to mention it casually. Now that Ying Gu mentioned his name irreverently they could not help but feel offended. The farmer was formerly the Emperor Duan's personal bodyguards' captain; he could not endure patiently. With a loud voice he shouted, "One day became an emperor, he will be honored for the rest of his life. How can it be that you speak without propriety?"

Ying Gu let out a long laugh and without saying anything charged forward. Four people respectively shot out their arms to block; they thought, "Even though her martial art skill is high, with us combining our efforts we should be able to stop her. We are going to disobey our order, but the situation is dire, we'll talk later."

Who would have thought that Ying Gu did not use her palm or fist to attack, but utilizing her lightness kungfu she bumped them. The woodcutter saw her coming fast, he did not dare to touch her body, he moved aside swiftly, then stretched out his hand trying to grab her shoulder. His hand was quick and powerful, but as soon as he touched her shoulder he felt like he was trying to grab something exceptionally slick, so that his hand slipped away.

By this time with a loud shout the farmer and the fisherman attacked from left and right. Ying Gu ducked and just like a slithery snake she slipped underneath the fisherman's armpit. The fisherman's nostrils caught a faint whiff of fragrance, it smelled like an orchid but not quite like an orchid, like musk deer but not quite like musk deer. He was frantic and did not dare to catch her body in between his arms; he opened up his arms instead for fear of touching her body.

The farmer was indignant, "What are you doing?" he shouted. With his ten fingers forming a pair of claws he tried to grab Ying Gu's waist.

"Don't be impolite!" the woodcutter called out.

The farmer turned a deaf ear to him, very soon his fingers had reached Ying Gu's waist, but somehow it was like his fingers were touching a very smooth and oily surface that they slipped away from her waist.

Ying Gu had used the 'ni qiu gong' [mud loach maneuver] she perfected in the Black Marsh to go through these three people. Now she knew that these four were helpless to block her. Her palm slapped backward toward the farmer. The scholar swung his arm with his finger aimed toward the acupoint on her hand. To his surprise Ying Gu did not retract her hand but stuck her index finger up and quick as

lightning two fingers collided in the air. The scholar had exerted all his strength to his right hand finger, suddenly he felt his finger went numb, his body felt like he was electrocuted. "Aiyo!" he cried out and fumbled down to the ground. The woodcutter and the fisherman busily stooped down to help.

The farmer's left fist went straight ahead like a hammer hurled toward Ying Gu's body. This attack carried a strong gust of wind, the force was astonishing. Seeing this strong attack Ying Gu stood her ground and did not evade. The farmer was alarmed; he thought if his fist hit her head, her skull would be cracked. Hastily he tried to withdraw his power, but by that time his fist had already touched the tip of Ying Gu's nose. Ying Gu leaned her head slightly, the fist slipped from her nose and slid to her cheek. The farmer retracted his left arm, but it was too late. His hand was grabbed by his opponent and with a 'crack' sound he felt a shot of pain on his arm. His elbow joint was broken by the back of her fist. The farmer gritted his teeth, ignoring the pain, his right hand index finger swiftly attacked the crook of the opponent's elbow.

The fisherman, the woodcutter, the farmer and the scholar's acupoint sealing technique was taught by Reverend Yideng. It was inferior to the Solitary Yang Finger with its infinite variations, but it could be considered as a first class acupoint sealing technique in the Wulin world; how would they know that fighting Ying Gu they were like fighting their black star. She was determined to avenge the death of her son; she fully realized Reverend Yideng's finger skill was very fierce, thereupon she spent a great deal of time and energy to find a method to subdue that skill. She was very skillful in embroidery, so she found her inspiration from the wonderful needlework technique. She wore a tiny golden hoop on the tip of her right hand index



finger; on the hoop was a three-fen (about 1 cm) long golden needle, which tip was dipped in poison. Her vision was excellent, her hand was steady; after training hard for several years she was able to prick a fly flying in the air. This time fighting the enemy she was able to prick the scholar's index finger. Seeing the direction of the farmer's finger she laughed coldly, lifting up her delicate hand she aimed her fingertip to his and pricked the farmer's finger.

As the saying goes, 'ten fingers join the heart', the tip of the index finger is connected to the hand's 'yang ming' [positive and bright] passage to the large intestine. As the golden needle pricked in, it hit the 'shang yang xue' [positive quotient acupoint] squarely.

In his last effort to score victory amidst a defeat, the farmer had exerted all his strength to his finger. Ying Gu on the other hand, did not have to exert any strength; all she needed to do was to position her golden needle right on the path of the farmer's finger. Hence she let the farmer prick his own finger by the needle.

As his finger was pricked, the farmer roared like a tiger and fumbled to the ground. Ying Gu coldly mocked, "Nice Captain!" and she dashed toward the courtyard in front of the meditation building.

"Niang-niang, stop!" the fisherman shouted.

Ying Gu halted her step and turned around; "And just how are you going to stop me?" she sneered. By that time she had already at the front of the lotus pond. The pond was connected to the meditation building by a small stone bridge. Ying Gu was standing on the bridge's end, staring at the fisherman. The night was dark, barely enough ambient light to recognize her face. The fisherman stood facing her,

he felt her stares were very cold; he shivered involuntarily and did not dare to step forward to stop her.

Ying Gu coldly said, "The Prime Minister and the Captain have been hit by my 'qi jue zhen' [seven lethal needle], nobody in this world can save their lives. Do you want to send your own life off?" Without waiting for an answer she turned around and slowly walked forward. Not once did she turn her head; apparently she was not afraid of any sneak attack.

It was only about twenty steps from the small bridge to the building. As she reached the end of the pathway, suddenly someone came out from the darkness; cupping up his fists he said, "Senior, how are you?"

Ying Gu was startled; she thought, "This person waited quietly here and appeared suddenly; why didn't I heard his breathing before? If he had evil intention I would have been dead or at least wounded." She fixed her eyes to look closer and saw this person was tall and broad-shouldered, with thick eyebrows and big eyes; it was precisely the person she gave directions to, Guo Jing. "Is the young miss' injury healed?" she asked.

Guo Jing bowed and said, "Thank you so much for your directions, Senior. Reverend Yideng has cured my martial sister's injury.

"Humph," Ying Gu snorted, "Why didn't she thank me in person?" Her mouth was speaking, but her feet also kept walking forward.

Guo Jing was standing at the other end of the bridge. "Senior, please return!" he hastily said.

Ying Gu ignored him; she slightly leaned her body sideways and utilizing the 'ni qiu gong' she slipped past by him. Even

though Guo Jing had fought Ying Gu at the Black Marsh, he did not anticipate she would slip pass him while still talking and that her body could be this slippery. In his desperation Guo Jing flung his left arm backward, attacking Ying Gu using the marvelous Vacant Fist of Zhou Botong.

Ying Gu thought that she had already slipped through Guo Jing; who would have thought that suddenly a soft yet strong gust of wind came from his fist pounced toward her face, forcing her to draw back. But Ying Gu was determined not to return, so no matter how strong Guo Jing's attack was, she bravely charged forward as if wanted to receive the blow head-on.

"Watch out!" Guo Jing hurriedly shouted. He felt a warm and soft female body was thrown into the crook of his own elbow. He was stunned. Taking advantage of his situation Ying Gu swept his feet and both of them fell into the lotus pond.

When they were still midair, Ying Gu's left hand slipped underneath Guo Jing's right arm pit, wound around his back and grabbed his left shoulder, her middle finger curled toward Guo Jing's throat while her thumb and index finger pinched the back of his neck with all her strength. It was the fiercest 'qian feng hou bi qi' [sealing front throat shutting air] technique from the 'qin na shou' [grab and capture]; so long as one pinch hit the mark, the enemy's air passage would be sealed and he would not be able to breathe.

While he was falling down Guo Jing felt his shoulder was grabbed, he knew his situation was not good. He bent his right arm to clasp Ying Gu's neck. It was also a technique from the 'qin na shou' called the 'hou xie jing bi qi' [clasping the back of the neck to close up breathing]. Ying Gu knew Guo Jing's arm strength was devastating, and that her own

strength was far too inferior; she knew although she attacked first but she could not compete with him in terms of brute force, so she let her hand off Guo Jing shoulder and stretched her finger to prick him instead. Guo Jing used his left arm to parry her finger.

Falling from the stone bridge to the lotus pond actually took a short moment, but two people had exchanged attacks and counterattacks swiftly; in a blink of an eye they had exchanged no less than three stances. Both were utilizing close combat techniques of 'qin na shou'. Ying Gu's skill was profound, yet Guo Jing's strength was astonishing. In these three stances victory and defeat could not be decided. 'Splash!' two people fell into the pond.

The bottom of the pond was covered with mud about three feet high; as they fell, they were immersed in the water up to their chests. Ying Gu's left hand scooped down some mud and smeared it toward Guo Jing's mouth. Guo Jing was shocked and lowered his head to avoid the mud. Ying Gu had lived on the Black Marsh for more than ten years. Her Loach Maneuver was developed based on watching loach diving and moving around in the mud. Fighting on land she was exceptionally slippery, how much more in the mud? She was like a tiger that grew wings. She intentionally dragged Guo Jing to the pond because she was aware of his martial art; she knew it would be difficult to cross the bridge with Guo Jing guarding it. Her finger-pricking technique was actually several times faster in the mud than on dry land; plus every now and then she scooped a handful of mud and smeared it on Guo Jing's face.

Both of Guo Jing's feet sank deep into the mud; moreover, he did not dare to use too much strength and accidentally injure her, so after about only four or five stances he was already at a disadvantage. He heard a swishing sound of mud coming toward his face; hastily he dodged sideways.

Who would have thought that as the first mud flew past; the second mud had arrived, followed by the third handful of mud, which hit him squarely on his face so that his mouth, nose and eyes were covered in stinky mud.

The Six Freaks of Jiangnan had taught him well, so he knew if he was hit by a secret projectile, he must not frantically trying to pull out the projectile, because then the enemy would seize the opportunity to assault and make a kill. At this moment he could not breathe and could not open his eyes; he moved his palms and launched three fierce stances so no one would be able to come within five feet near him. Just then he wiped the mud from his face with his left hand and opened his eyes; but Ying Gu had already leaped up to the stone bridge and dashed toward the meditation courtyard.

As Ying Gu successfully went through Guo Jing she secretly scolded herself, "Ashamed! If there were no pond, how would I overcome this dumb kid? It looks like the Heaven is helping me to seek revenge today."

She sped up her steps and arrived at the temple door shortly. She raised her hand to push; the door was not bolted, it opened immediately with a soft creaking sound. This time she did not rush in, expecting an ambush or some booby trap on the door. She waited outside the door only to see the room was empty, nothing astir. Slowly Ying Gu entered the room. She saw it was a meditation room with a single oil lamp illuminating the image of Buddha with a dignified face. Ying Gu's heart turned sour, she knelt on the meditation mat and offered a silent prayer.

She just barely prayed for a short moment when suddenly she heard someone chuckle softly behind her. Immediately her left hand flung backward in a sweeping movement to block any potential sneak attack, while her right hand

pushed down the mediation mat, borrowing the momentum to leap upward and made a graceful somersault in the air before landing back down to the ground.

"Excellent skill!" she heard a woman's voice applaud. Ying Gu turned to look and saw a young girl wearing green clothes with red belt around her waist and a bunch of golden hoops flickering under the lamp light on her hair, her pair of beautiful eyes stared at Ying Gu with a hint of smile in them; there was a gleaming dark green bamboo stick in her hand. Needless to say, it was Huang Rong. "Senior Ying Gu, I thank you for your kindness in saving my life," she said.

"I gave you directions to treat your injury, but my real intention was to harm others," Ying Gu said matter-of-factly, "So I really was not saving your life. Why should you thank me?"

Huang Rong sighed, "Vengeance and debt of kindness is really difficult to understand. My father imprisoned the Old Urchin Zhou Botong on the Peach Blossom Island for fifteen years. In the end he still could not save my mother's life."

As she heard the name 'Zhou Botong' was mentioned, Ying Gu was extremely shocked. "What relation did your mother have with Zhou Botong?" she asked sternly.

Hearing her tone Huang Rong knew she suspected Zhou Botong had some love affair with her mother and consequently was imprisoned by her father on the Peach Blossom Island. Apparently even after more than a dozen years her feeling toward Zhou Botong did not subside; otherwise why would she drink vinegar over nothing?

Lowering her head, in a mournful voice Huang Rong said, "My mother died of exhaustion due to the Old Urchin."

Ying Gu was more suspicious than ever. Under the dim light she could see Huang Rong's skin was as white as snow, her eyes and eyebrows were beautiful; even Ying Gu in her prime years was not as beautiful as she was. She deducted that Huang Rong's mother must also be beautiful; it would be difficult for Zhou Botong to see her and not be attracted to her. Ying Gu frowned involuntarily.

"Don't you have any ideas," Huang Rong said, "My mother is like an angel; that Zhou Botong is as stupid and stubborn as a cow. Unless the woman has eyes but fails to see, nobody would have a crush on him."

Ying Gu knew Huang Rong was mocking her, but her suspicion was gone; she was instantly relieved. Without batting an eyelid she coldly retorted, "Since there is someone who loves Guo Jing who is as stupid as a pig, there must be someone who loves a man as stupid and stubborn as a cow. How did the Old Urchin cause your mother's death?"

Huang Rong pouted and said, "You scold my martial brother; I won't talk to you." She brushed her sleeve and turned around, pretending to be mad.

Ying Gu really wanted to know about Zhou Botong, so she busily said, "All right, I won't do that anymore. Your martial brother is actually very smart."

Huang Rong halted her steps and turned around. "That Old Urchin did not intentionally cause my mother's death," she said, "It was very unfortunate of my mother to die because of him. In his anger my father imprisoned him on the Peach Blossom Island; but afterwards my father regretted it. Injustice has its cause, debt has its originator. If someone killed your loved one you should go to the ends of the earth

to seek vengeance on the murderer. Why would you vent your anger toward others?"

This speech was like a severe blow on Ying Gu's head; she stood still without making any noise. She heard Huang Rong continue, "My father had long ago freed the Old Urchin ..." Ying Gu was pleasantly surprised, "Then I don't have to rescue him?" she asked.

Huang Rong smiled, "If my father had not released him, were you going to rescue the Old Urchin?" she asked. Ying Gu was silent.

When Ying Gu left Dali her intention was to look for Zhou Botong. The first few years was spent without hearing any news about him. Then quite by accident she heard from the Twin Killers of the Dark Wind that Zhou Botong was imprisoned on the Peach Blossom Island by Huang Yaoshi; but as for the reason behind it she could not inquire. That day when Zhou Botong renounced her and left Dali she knew that it would be very difficult for him to have a change of heart if not because of some significant cause. This time as she learned about his predicament she was both happy and sad at the same time; sad because the man she loved was in trouble, happy because she thought this was a good opportunity. If she managed to rescue him, how could he not have deep affection toward her? Who would have thought that the roads and pathways on the Peach Blossom Island had a thousand turns and a hundred detours? No need to mention rescuing anybody, she almost died of starvation for three days and three nights. If Huang Yaoshi did not send a deaf and mute servant to show her the way, she would never leave that island alive. Thereupon she made the Black Marsh her residence, diligently learning math and theory of numbers. Now she heard that Zhou Botong had been released she stared blankly with all kinds of thoughts bubbling up in her heart.



Huang Rong smiled and gently said, "The Old Urchin is most willing to listen to me; he won't dare to turn down whatever I say. If you want to see him, follow me and go down the mountain. Let me be the matchmaker between the two of you; just consider it my way of saying thanks for saving my life." Her words had made Ying Gu's cheeks turn red with her heart thumping wild.

Seeing her speech might turn murderous intent into a happy occasion Huang Rong felt smug. Suddenly she heard a slapping sound; Ying Gu's palms struck each other. Her face looked like it was covered with a layer of frost; sternly she said, "What makes him listen to you, a girl surnamed Huang? Why would he follow your direction? Because of your good looks? I have never shown kindness to you, I don't need you to repay. Quickly make way for me, or else don't blame me for being merciless."

"Aiyo, you want to kill me?" Huang Rong laughed.

Ying Gu raised her eyebrows. "What if I do?" she coldly said, "Others are scared of the Old Heretic Huang, I am not afraid of the heaven and the earth."

Huang Rong chuckled, "Killing me is not a big deal," she said cheekily, "But who would help you solve the three mathematical problems I left for you?"

Since that day Huang Rong wrote three mathematical problems on the sand inside the thatched hut at the Black Marsh, Ying Gu had painstakingly racked her brain day and night; but she did not have any clue on how to solve them. At first she studied mathematics with the intention of rescuing Zhou Botong; but later on she was captivated with this complex yet mysterious subject. The further she dug into it, the more fascinated she became that sometimes she forgot to eat or sleep, and could not stop even if she wanted

to. She knew perfectly well that even if she could solve these problems, compared to Huang Yaoshi's, her skill would still be like heaven from earth; in other words, it would not help her the least a bit in her plan to rescue Zhou Botong. But curiosity had forced her to rack her brain; without a clear answer it would be difficult for her to keep her mind at peace. Now that Huang Rong mentioned it, the three subjects immediately flashed on her mind clearly; without realizing it her face showed hesitation.

"Don't kill me, I'll teach you," Huang Rong said. She took the oil lamp from the image of Buddha and placed it on the ground. Taking a golden needle out, she started writing numbers and letters on the brick floor.

The first subject was the 'qi yao jiu zhi tian zhu bi suan' [seven dazzling nine grasping Indian method of calculation]. As Ying Gu saw the solution she was dazzled and could not help but secretly sigh in praise. Huang Rong continued with the second subject, the 'li fang zhao bing zhi yin gei mi ti' [lit. standing up soldier supplying silver topic] had profound changes in it. As Ying Gu waited for her to write the last answer she sighed and said, "This middle subject surely has an endless wonderful secret."

A moment later she said, "If we say the third subject to be easy, then it is easy; but if we regard it as difficult, then it is difficult. There is an unknown number; three and three has a remainder of two, five and five has a remainder of three, seven and seven has a remainder of two. What number is that? I know it was twenty-three; but that was a hard guess. I need to line up every number for all interchangeable computational patterns, but even after thinking until I split my head I could not figure it out."

Huang Rong smiled, "It is very easy. Calculating three and three, it amounts to seventy. Calculating five and five, it

amounts to twenty-one. Calculating seven and seven, it amounts to fifteen. Adding three numbers together, if not greater than 105, then that's the correct answer. Otherwise, subtract 105 or its multiple."

Ying Gu calculated it in her heart and sure enough she got the correct answer. With a low voice she recited, "Calculating three and three, it amounts to seventy. Calculating five and five ..."

Huang Rong said, "You don't have to memorize it like that. Let me give you a poem to help you memorize it easier: Three people travel together in seventy directions, five plum blossom trees have twenty one branches, seven children reunite for half a month, a hundred and five remained to be known."

Listening to 'three people travel together' and 'reunite for half a month' Ying Gu felt offended, she thought, "This girl knows him, she knew my shameful secret from early on. 'Three people traveling together' is me one woman serving two men. Could it be that by 'reunite for half a month' she was ridiculing me of having a love affair knowing him for only a dozen of days?" What she did in the years past had become a matter of the heart to her, unavoidably she became quite over-suspicious to everybody. "All right," she said flatly, "Thank you for your directions. 'Asking direction in the morning, bored to death in the evening'. Must I stay to listen to you speaking more nonsense?"

Huang Rong smiled, "'Asking direction in the morning, bored to death in the evening.' The one who died is the one asking; but I've never heard the one asking question kill the one preaching the sermon."

Ying Gu stole a glance toward the meditation room; she knew Emperor Duan must be residing in the back. She saw

Huang Rong kept pestering her, something was amiss. Even though Huang Rong was young, her intelligence and eccentricity was not inferior to her father's. How could a thirty-year-old lady bicker with a baby? She was afraid her luck would turn bad just like a ship capsized in the gutter. She had wasted not a few moments because she wanted to look at Huang Rong's calculations; while a very important matter was still ahead of her. How could she allow senseless thought over mathematics consume her energy? Therefore, she decided not to answer and immediately lifted up her feet to walk inside.

Crossing over the worship hall she saw there was a dark room ahead with only one flickering light inside. As a wary person she did not dare to rush in; raising her voice up she called out, "Duan Zhixing, are you or are you not going to see me? You hide your tail in the dark, what kind of real man are you?"

Huang Rong followed behind her, laughing, "You don't like there is no lamp in here? The Reverend was afraid too much light would scare you away, so he ordered us to put the lights out."

"Humph," Ying Gu snorted, "I am the kind of person who is not afraid to go to hell, why would a mountain of blades or boiling oil scare me?"

Huang Rong clapped her hands and laughed, "That's very good! I want to play around the mountain of blades with you." Taking out a flint from her pocket, lighted it up, then she stooped down and lighted a lamp next to her feet.

Turned out there was an oil lamp on the ground; it surprised even Ying Gu. She looked closer to see that it was not an oil lamp, but a small porcelain tea cup filled halfway with oil, with a cotton ball dipped in it as the wick. Next to

the cup was a sharpened bamboo stick about a foot long, inserted on the ground with the sharpened end on the top; it looked really sharp.

Huang Rong did not pause, she kept moving and in just a short moment the floor was filled with flickering lights like stars on a dark night. Next to each cup was a sharp bamboo stick. Before Huang Rong even finished Ying Gu had started counting, and she found out there were 113 teacups with 113 bamboo sticks next to them. She was greatly baffled, "If it is the 'mei hua zhuang' [plum blossom stake] arrangement, then it must have either 72 sticks or 108 sticks, but it has 113 sticks; what kind of arrangement is this? The array seems random, not the 'jiu gong ba gua' [nine-palace eight-diagram], also not 'mei hua wu chu' [plum blossom five arrangements]. Moreover, these bamboo sticks are so sharp, how can somebody stand on them? Ah, right, she must be wearing iron-soled shoes." She further thought, "This girl is prepared, I can't fight her on these things yet I can't ignore this. I'll just go through it then." Thereupon with big strides she walked forward, but the bamboo sticks were densely packed, it was difficult to walk through them, so she kicked around and broke five, six sticks while saying, "What crafty trick is this? The old lady doesn't have time to play around with the baby."

Hurriedly Huang Rong called, "Ah, ah! Don't do that! Don't do that!" Ying Gu ignored her and kept kicking. "All right!" Huang Rong called out, "You don't want to talk reason with me, I am going to turn off the lights. Quickly memorize the bamboo sticks' positions."

Ying Gu was startled, she thought, "If these people gang up and plan to attack me, they must have memorized the position of these sticks early on. I could get killed among the bamboo sticks in the dark. I must leave this dangerous

place quickly!" She gave her spirit a boost and sped her steps up, kicking furiously.

"Shameless!" Huang Rong called out. She brandished her bamboo stick trying to block Ying Gu. The oil lamp shone on the dark-green bamboo stick, creating a spooky shadow dancing in front of Ying Gu's face. Of course Ying Gu did not think much about a teenage girl's stick technique. Her left palm hacked vertically down; she thought one palm should be enough to break the bamboo stick. Who would have thought that Huang Rong's stick technique was the Dog Beating Stick's sealing technique; the stick moved horizontally, it was not aimed at the enemy's body, but it turned into a piece of jade-green wall blocking in front of the door. As long as the enemy did not tread a step, the wall would not hurt the least bit, but if one attacked one would immediately hit.

As Ying Gu hacked down her palm, 'crack!' her palm was hit by the end of the stick. Hastily she withdrew her already pain and numb hand. She was not hit on a vital acupoint, but the pain was severe. Formerly Ying Gu did not think much of Huang Rong's martial art, but as she was hit she became startled and angry. She realized now that this young crafty kid was not easy to deal with. She swallowed her anger and cautiously guarded against the opponent's martial art, trying to gain more understanding before deciding on the next course of action. She thought, "I have seen the Twin Killers of the Dark Wind's martial art. Their skills were very profound, but they were already thirty, forty years old. How can this little girl attain this kind of level? It must be that Huang Yaoshi has passed on his lifelong achievement to his only beloved daughter."

When she went to the Peach Blossom Island she had suffered a bitter defeat without even seeing Huang Yaoshi, almost died on the island; therefore, she always feared the

Master of the Peach Blossom Island. She actually did not know that this Dog Beating Technique was the Beggar Clan Leader's unique skill, that even if Huang Yaoshi were there, he would not necessarily be able to penetrate the stick's defense immediately.

While Ying Gu hesitated and held her attack back, Huang Rong kept moving her stick with the sealing technique, blocking Ying Gu from entering the door. In the meantime Huang Rong's feet did not stay idle, she moved from one bamboo stick to the other with agility like a dancing butterfly, kicking the flames one by one. In a short moment she had extinguished most of the 113 oil lamps.

The way she kicked the lamps was amazing; not only she did not step on any teacup, none of the teacups was kicked upside down or smashed, also only a little bit of oil was splashed over. She was fully utilizing the Peach Blossom Island's 'sao ye tui fa' [sweeping leaves leg/kicking technique]. Her movement was swift and accurate, but Ying Gu could see that her skill had not yet reached perfection, it was far inferior to the marvelous changes of the bamboo stick technique. Moreover, although her injury had been healed, her strength had not fully recovered yet. Ying Gu thought that if she attacked the lower part of Huang Rong's body she might score a victory within dozens of stances. However, as Ying Gu was contemplating her course of action only about seven or eight oil lamps were left flickering in the wind on the northeast corner of the room; while the other three corners were already pitch-black.

Suddenly Huang Rong's stick moved twice, Ying Gu was startled; under the faint yellow light of the oil lamp she saw a clearance in between two sharp bamboo stick on the ground, giving her an opportunity to retreat one step. Huang Rong stuck her stick on the ground and using it as a pole her body floated in the air horizontally; her long sleeve

whisked off and extinguished the seven, eight remaining lamps.

Ying Gu groaned inwardly, "Although I believe I have a way to score victory, among these sharp bamboo sticks every step I take can pierce a hole on my foot; how am I going to fight?" she thought. In the darkness she heard Huang Rong call out, "Have you memorized the bamboo sticks position? Let us fight for thirty stances; if you can defeat me, I will let you go in to see Emperor Duan, all right?"

Ying Gu replied, "You are the one who arranged these sticks. I don't know how much time you spent practicing here; while you only gave others a wink to look at these many oil lamps."

Huang Rong was still young and proud, she always tried to outdo others, she also had a high confidence on her excellent memory, so she smiled and said, "What's so difficult about it? If you want you can light up the oil lamps rearrange the bamboo sticks as you wish, then extinguish the lamps before we fight again, all right?"

Ying Gu thought, "This is not a martial art contest, but a memorization competition. This little demon's intelligence is matchless, how can I risk my life playing memory game with her while my big enmity is not avenged?" But suddenly she got an inspiration; after thinking about it for a moment she said, "Fine, that's fair enough. Let the Old Lady accompany you playing." Taking a flint from her pocket she lighted the oil lamps.

"Why do you keep calling yourself an old lady?" Huang Rong laughed, "I think you are beautiful, you are prettier than a sixteen years old girl. No wonder Emperor Duan was so crazy about you."



Ying Gu was about to pull a bamboo stick and move it someplace else; hearing this she stopped dead on her track. "He was crazy about me?" she coldly said, "I was in the palace two whole years; just when did he pay any attention to other people?"

"Ah," Huang Rong was surprised, "Didn't he teach you martial art?" she asked.

Ying Gu retorted, "Is teaching martial art considered paying attention?"

"Ah, I know," Huang Rong said, "Emperor Duan was training the 'xian tian gong' [innate/inborn strength/energy], that's why he could not get intimate with you."

"Humph," Ying Gu snorted, "What do you know? How come he got the crown prince?"

Huang Rong leaned her head sideways; she thought for a moment before answering, "The crown prince was born before he started training 'xian tian gong'."

Ying Gu snorted again but did not say anything. She kept pulling the sticks and inserted them back in different places. As she inserted the bamboo sticks one by one Huang Rong memorized their positions carefully; she did not dare to be careless. It was a matter of life and death, if she missed just a few inches during the fight, it would mean immediate disaster to her foot.

A moment later Huang Rong spoke again, "Emperor Duan was not willing to save your son because of his love for you."

"You knew everything?" Ying Gu said, "Humph, because of his love to me?" Her voice was brimming with bitterness.

"He was jealous of the Old Urchin," Huang Rong said, "If he did not love you, why would he be jealous? He saw your 'four weaving machines' mandarin ducks handkerchief and was extremely grieved because of it."

Ying Gu had never thought Emperor Duan had this kind of feeling toward her, she could not help but be lost in thought. Huang Rong continued, "I think you'd better come back."

Ying Gu coldly said, "Only if you have the ability to defeat me."

"All right," Huang Rong said, "Since you insist, I have no alternative but risking my life to accompany you. If you can break through my defense, I definitely will not hinder you anymore. But what if you can't?"

"I will never go up this mountain again," Ying Gu said, "I will also free you from your obligation to accompany me for a year."

"Wonderful!" Huang Rong clapped her hands, "It would be really unbearable for me to accompany you on that rotten black marsh."

While talking Ying Gu had already inserted about fifty, sixty sticks; immediately she kicked the oil lamps one by one and said, "The rest of them can stay as they are." In the darkness her five fingers formed a claw fiercely attacking Huang Rong.

Remembering the sticks location Huang Rong slanted her body sideways and without hesitation her left foot landed exactly in between two sticks; while the dog beating stick in her hand shook and attacked Ying Gu's left shoulder. Who would have thought that Ying Gu ignored her attack, she kept moving forward in big strides and with a series of

cracking sound she broke about a dozen bamboo sticks with her feet; hence freely she walked to the rear courtyard.

“Aiyo!” Huang Rong was startled; she realized immediately what had happened, “I am duped. Turned out when moving the sticks around she exerted her strength and secretly pinched the sticks broken.” Because she was trying to outdo others she had not suspected Ying Gu would do such thing; she could not help but feel really vexed.

Rushing to the rear courtyard Ying Gu stretched out her hand to shove the door open. She saw an old monk sitting on a meditation mat in the middle of the room; his silvery beard hung down to his chest, a thick monk robe wrapped around his body up to his cheeks, his head hung low in meditation. The fisherman, the woodcutter, the farmer and the scholar, along with several old monks and young apprentices stood on either side.

The woodcutter saw Ying Gu came in, he stepped forward to the old monk, clasped his palms and said, “Shifu, Liu Niang-niang has come to visit.” The old monk slightly nodded his head without saying anything.

There was only a single oil lamp in the entire meditation room, so Ying Gu could not see everybody’s face clearly. She had known earlier that Emperor Duan had become a monk, but actually she did not think that after about a dozen years without seeing each other a heroic martial artist emperor could turn into such a fragile old monk. Recalling Huang Rong’s speech she realized now that the Emperor was not totally pitiless toward her. Her heart melted and her firm grip of the dagger slowly turned loose.

Lowering her head she saw the embroidered handkerchief that was wrapped around her baby was laid in front of the meditation mat where Emperor Duan was sitting. On top of

that 'du dou' was the jade bracelet which the Emperor gave her. Instantaneously past events like entering the palace, training martial art, meeting Zhou, love and passion, giving birth to her son, mourning his death, everything came flashing through her mind one by one like scenes on the stage; then she saw her son's look when he was in so much pain. Although he was still a baby it seemed like his eyes spoke thousand sentences ten thousand words wondering why his mother did not alleviate his pain and suffering. Her anger rose, she raised her dagger up and with a swift movement the dagger stabbed Emperor Duan's chest, all through the handle.

She knew Emperor Duan's martial art skill, this stab might not necessarily kill him; moreover, when the dagger went into his chest she had a slightly different feeling. Right away she pulled the dagger back to stab him the second time. Who would have thought that the dagger was firmly stuck between his ribs; she was unable to pull it back in a moment.

The four disciples called out in alarm and rushed forward simultaneously. In her bitterness Ying Gu had painstakingly practiced this stab thousands of times over a dozen of years period. She knew perfectly well that Emperor Duan would surely guard against her attack, so while her right hand did the stabbing, her left palm had already fluttered around, guarding the left, right and the back, three sides of her own body. Now that she could not pull the dagger back, she saw the circumstances had turned to her disadvantage. Her feet moved and she leaped toward the door. Turning her head around she caught a glimpse of Emperor Duan with his left hand on his chest, seemingly in great pain.

Now that her big enmity had been avenged, just as quick she was not sure of what she did anymore; suddenly remembered, "I had an affair with someone else and gave

birth to a child, he did not speak even half a word of reproach and left me live freely in the palace. Not only he did not execute me, but he abundantly provided everything for me. In actuality he was always very good to me." All along she only remembered that Emperor Duan did not save her son's life, her heart was filled with hatred. Only after stabbing his chest did she remember all his kindness. She heaved a deep sigh, turned around and went out the door.

As she turned around she gasped in horror with sweats came pouring down her body, because she saw an old monk clasping his palms in front of his chest was standing on the door. Under the lamp light she could see his face looked grand and his eyes showed compassion; although he was wearing a monk robe it was as clear as the day that he was the former ruler of the southern kingdom, Emperor Duan. It was as if Ying Gu was seeing an apparition; like a flash of lightning a thought came into her mind, "Did I just kill the wrong person?" She swept her gaze backward and saw the monk she had just stabbed was slowly standing up; while removing his monk attire his left hand pulled on his chin and the white long beard came off. Ying Gu uttered another cry of shock; it turned out that old monk was Guo Jing in disguise.

It was precisely Huang Rong's scheme: Guo Jing sealed Reverend Yideng's acupoint and deliberately took his place to receive Ying Gu's dagger. He was afraid the Indian Monk's martial art skill might be high, so he attacked him first; who would have thought that the Indian Monk did not even know martial arts. Later on Huang Rong delayed Ying Gu by explaining the three mathematical problems in the courtyard; and then using the dog beating technique she fought her amidst the sharpened bamboo sticks by the oil lamps. In the meantime the four disciples quickly helped

Guo Jing wash up the mud and shave his head clean. They also shaved Reverend Yideng's long white beard and stuck it underneath Guo Jing's chin. Actually the four disciples did not feel comfortable treating their master in such a disrespectful manner and to let Guo Jing brave a grave danger; they were feeling very uneasy. But in order to save their master's life they did not have any other choice; if it were one of the four disciples disguising themselves, their martial art was inferior to Ying Gu, they might die under Ying Gu's dagger.

As Ying Gu stabbed her dagger Guo Jing deftly moved his two fingers inside the monk robe to pinch the flat sides of the dagger. Who would have thought that Ying Gu's stab was so powerful that even with Guo Jing's finger strength the blade still cut through about half an inch of his flesh; luckily it did not break his ribs and he only suffered a superficial wound. He could have worn the soft hedgehog armor, which was impenetrable by the dagger; but Ying Gu was cunning; she would perceive the difference, then they would not get rid of the source of the disaster. If she failed this time, she would come back to seek revenge in the future.

Everybody was delighted to see this 'jin chan tuo qiao zhi ji' [lit. golden cicada sheds its shell tactic] accomplished successfully; who would have thought that Yideng chose this very moment to make a sudden appearance. Not only Ying Gu was startled, but everybody else also did not anticipate this to happen.

Because Yideng suffered a heavy injury and lost his strength, Guo Jing did not dare to seal his acupoint with too much strength for fear of injuring him further. In the back room Yideng slowly circulated his internal energy to unseal his own acupoint, and then he went back to the meditation room, arriving exactly at this moment.

Ying Gu's face was pale like that of a corpse, she thought she had fallen into this trap and certainly would not have a good fortune. But Yideng told Guo Jing, "Return the dagger to her."

Guo Jing did not dare to defy, he returned the dagger to Ying Gu. Ying Gu absentmindedly took the dagger while staring at Yideng. She was wondering what kind of torture he would use against her. But she saw that he slowly removed his monk robe and also his undergarment, and then said, "Nobody shall give her any trouble, let her go down the mountain in peace. All right, go ahead and stab me; I have been waiting for you for a long, long time."

These words were said very gently, but in Ying Gu's ears they were like thunderous lightning in a bright daylight. She stood motionless for half a day, then her grip loosened and the dagger fell to the ground with a clanking sound. Covering her face with both hands she rushed out of the room. They heard her footsteps as she went farther and farther away until finally they could hear her anymore.

Everybody looked at each other in shock, nobody made any noise. Suddenly 'thump, thump' the student and the farmer fell backward to the ground. Turned out because their fingers were poisoned, in the commotion that followed they suppressed the poison using their internal energy; by now they saw their master was well, their hearts were relieved and could not hold the poison much longer.

"Hurry, invite Martial Uncle!" the woodcutter called out.

Before he finished Huang Rong had already accompanied the Indian Monk walking into the room. He was an expert in treating poison related illness. He quickly gave two people some medicine to take, also cut their fingers to get rid of the black blood. His face looked very serious, while his

mouth mumbling in sanskrit, “A ma li, ha shi tu, si gu er, qi nuo dan ji.”

Yideng understood Sanskrit, he knew his disciples’ lives were not in danger. They would have to be treated for two months then they would be healed completely.

Meanwhile Guo Jing had removed his monk robe and treated the wound on his chest; he bowed to the ground in front of Yideng to apologize. Yideng busily held out his hand to raise him up; he sighed and said, “You risked your life to save mine; nothing to forgive.” Then he turned toward his martial brother and explained in Sanskrit what Guo Jing had done.

The Indian monk said, “Si li xing, ang yi na de.”

Guo Jing was startled; he knew these two sentences, and he could even recite the next line, “Si re que xu, ha hu wen bo ying ...”

Zhou Botong had taught him to recite the Nine Yin Manual in its entirety. The last part of Manual was full of all these strange sentences. Guo Jing did not understand its meaning, but he was forced to memorize the entire Manual including all these mumbo-jumbo; hence he was able to recite it effortlessly.

Hearing him speaking Sanskrit Yideng and the Indian Monk were stunned; moreover, what he had just said was related to excellent technique to cultivate internal energy; they were even more astonished. Yideng asked him the whole story and Guo Jing told him without concealing anything. Yideng was endlessly marveled, he said, “I have heard the story behind the Nine Yin Manual from Chongyang Zhenren. Huang Shang, the person who compiled the manual was not only highly skilled, he was also well-versed in the Daoist canon, skilled in the internal energy



cultivation, and understood Sanskrit. When the manual was complete, the last chapter was actually the essence of it. Suddenly he realized that if this manual falls into the hand of criminals, they would be able to turn the world upside down without anybody controlling them. But he was also unwilling to destroy this last chapter; thereupon he rewrote the chapter in Sanskrit, but with Chinese transliteration. He thought that it was difficult to say whether the Manual could be passed on to the future generation; the people of Central Plains who knew Sanskrit was very few, and even more rare was the number of people who were well-versed both in martial art and Sanskrit literature. If the Manual fall into the hand of an Indian, although he is proficient in Sanskrit, but he does not speak Chinese. Huang Shang arranged it this way; actually it was the same as not allowing the future generation to understand the content. Because of this Sanskrit part even Chongyang Zhenren did not understand the Manual's meaning. Who would have thought that through divine intervention you who do not understand Sanskrit can actually memorize this lengthy great theory that sounds like incantations? It is truly a very rare opportunity." Thereupon he asked Guo Jing to recite the Sanskrit part slowly while he translated it into Chinese, wrote it on a piece of paper and gave it to Guo Jing and Huang Rong.

The overall guiding principle of energy cultivation in the Nine Yin Manual was mysteriously deep; although Reverend Yideng was a proficient scholar with profound internal energy, he could not dissect the theory completely in such a short period of time. "Stay on the mountain for a few days, let me dig into it comprehensively, then I will transfer my knowledge to you two," he said. He further said, "Usually as my internal strength is damaged, I will need five years of continuous training for a full recovery; but if I practice according to the Manual, it seems like in less than three

months I will get a five-year-worth of internal energy cultivation. Although what I practiced is a Buddhist martial art, which was different from the Taoism method of internal energy cultivation in the Manual, but looking at this principle, as the martial art is trained to the highest level, different approaches will lead to the same result; it is no different than the Buddhism method.”

Huang Rong told him how Hong Qigong was injured by Ouyang Feng. Reverend Yideng showed great concern. “You two must tell your Shifu about the Nine Yin internal energy cultivation method; I am certain he will recover his internal strength,” he said. Guo Jing and Huang Rong were very delighted to hear this.

Two people stayed on the mountain for more than ten days. Everyday Reverend Yideng explained the Nine Yin energy cultivation method to them. Huang Rong also took this opportunity for her own recovery.

One particular day they were walking idly outside the meditation building when suddenly they heard anxious cry of eagles in the air; they saw a pair of white eagles in the distance coming from the east. Huang Rong clapped her hands, “Jin wawa [lit. golden baby – see Chapter 29] is here!” The pair of eagles folded their wings and landed, they looked weary. Two people could not help to be alarmed; they saw a gaping wound on the breast of the female eagle. It looked like an arrow wound, but the arrow was no longer there; apparently the eagles had pulled the arrow themselves. There was a piece of green cloth tied on the male eagle’s foot; but they did not bring any ‘jin wawa’ with them.

Huang Rong recognized this piece of green cloth as coming from her father’s robe; then the pair of eagles had indeed been to the Peach Blossom Island. Could it be that there

were powerful enemies on the Island? Could it be that Huang Yaoshi was too busy engaging the enemy that he did not have a chance to fulfill his daughter's request?

The pair of eagles was smart animals, yet the female eagle was hit by an arrow; indicating the person shooting the arrow must have been an excellent martial artist. Guo Jing quickly applied some ointment and wrapped the wound on the female eagle's breast. Huang Rong was thinking hard for half a day, but in the end she still did not have any clue as to what was happening. Too bad the eagles could not talk, otherwise they would be able to tell what they saw on the Peach Blossom Island.

Two people worried over Huang Yaoshi's safety; hence they bid farewell to Reverend Yideng immediately. "We can still be together for many days to come, but since there is something happening on the Peach Blossom Island I cannot retain you anymore. However, Yao Xiong [Brother Yao] is all-resourceful; he is wise and smart. I believe no one in the present age is able to harm him; you two do not have to be too anxious."

Yideng then sent for the fisherman, the woodcutter, the farmer and the scholar; together with Guo Jing and Huang Rong they sat on meditation mats in front of him. He explained the essence of martial art for several hours. When he was finished Guo Jing and Huang Rong bid their farewell reluctantly. The scholar and the farmer had not recovered yet, so they only sent them off to the gate. The fisherman and the woodcutter walked them off to the foot of the mountain. They waited until the two people found their little red horse and at last said their goodbyes with heavy hearts.

Guo Jing and Huang Rong returned via the same road, the scenery was still the same; but their feeling was entirely

different from when they went up the mountain just several days ago. Remembering Reverend Yideng's profound kindness could not help but cause her to bend her knees and bow toward the mountain peak. Guo Jing followed her and kowtowed several times.

Along the way although Huang Rong was concerned about her father, she thought that all the time he had roamed the world far and wide he rarely suffered any setback. Even if he met a powerful enemy, perhaps he would not win, but at least he had enough ability to defend himself; just like Reverend Yideng had said, "No one in the present age is able to harm him." Therefore, she was not overly anxious.

Two people sat on the little red horse's back, chatting casually in light mood. Huang Rong laughed, "I don't know how many times we faced dangers since we met each other, but every time we suffered some loss, we also had some gains. Like this time I suffered injury under that old Qiu Qianren's palms; in the end we found out the marvelous secret of the 'jiu yin shen gong' [lit. nine yin divine strength/energy]; which Wang Chongyang himself did not understand."

"I would rather not know any martial art as long as you are safe and well," Guo Jing said.

In her heart Huang Rong was very happy but she laughed and said, "Aiyo, if you want to flatter others you don't need to blow such a big horn! If you don't know martial art, you would be long dead. Let's not talk about Ouyang Feng, Sha Tongtian and the others; even a black-dressed Iron Palm Clan member would be able to cut your head with a knife."

"No matter what I can't allow you to be injured anymore," Guo Jing said, "Last time when I was injured in Lin'an I felt

all right; but these past few days looking at you suffering so much pain, ay, that was really not good.”

“Humph,” Huang Rong smiled, “You are a heartless man.”

“Why?” Guo Jing wondered.

“You would rather be injured,” Huang Rong said, “Do you think I will feel all right?”

Guo Jing was taken aback; and then he let out a long laugh. His legs kicked the little red horse’s ribs and the horse ran faster; it looked like its four feet were flying above the ground that by noon they had arrived at Taoyuan prefecture. Huang Rong had not yet recovered fully; after half a day of riding she was very tired, her cheeks were flushed and she was panting for breath. There was only one decent restaurant in the city of Taoyuan, it was called ‘bi qin jiu lou’ [evading qin (dynasty) wine shop; lou – multi-story building]. Its name came from the ‘tao hua yuan ji’ [a note on the origin of peach blossom] a literary work of Tao Yuanming [Translator’s note: different characters from the ‘Taoyuan’ prefecture].

Guo Jing and Huang Rong took a seat and immediately called for food and wine. To the wine shop attendant Guo Jing said, “Brother, we need to go to Hankou; I am wondering if you could go down to the river and invite a boatman to come over here to talk to us.”

The wine shop attendant said, “If Sir is willing to ride the boat together with other people, you will save quite a bit of money. To charter a boat just for the two of you will cost you a lot of money.”

Huang Rong rolled her eyes; she took a silver ingot worth five ‘liang’s and tossed it to the table. “Is it enough?” she asked.

"Enough, enough," the wine shop attendant busily said with a smile. He turned around and went downstairs.

Guo Jing was afraid Huang Rong's condition has worsened, so he forbade her from drinking wine; as a result, he also restrained from drinking himself, they only ate the meals. They just ate half a bowl of food when the wine shop attendant came back with a boatman; saying that the boatman agreed to take them to Hankou, the rice was included but the dishes were not, and the total cost would be three 'liang's and six 'qian's of silver. Huang Rong did not bargain; she simply gave the silver ingot to the boatman. The boatman took the silver and cupped his hands in an expression of gratitude; he pointed to his own mouth and made several hoarse throaty 'Ah' sounds. Turned out he was a mute. His hand flailing to the east and pointing to the west, making some hand signals. Huang Rong nodded and also made some hand signals. It seemed like their signals were very complicated and they were communicating at length, exchanging signals incessantly. At last the mute looked pleased, he nodded his head repeatedly and left.

"What were the two of you discussing?" Guo Jing asked.

"He said we'll leave as soon as we finish eating here," Huang Rong replied, "I told him to buy several chickens, several catties of meat, some good wine and vegetables; and not to worry about money. I will reimburse everything later."

Guo Jing sighed, "If I met this mute boatman by myself, I wouldn't know what to do," he said. Since all the servants on the Peach Blossom Island were deaf and mute, Huang Rong had learned how to communicate in sign language since she was two years old.

The honey-steamed cured fish of that restaurant was really tasty; Guo Jing ate several pieces and remembered Hong Qigong. "I wonder where 'en shi' [benevolent master] is, and how is his injury?" he said, "Thinking about him makes me worried." He wished he could wrap some cured fish and gave it to Hong Qigong.

Huang Rong was about to reply when she heard footsteps coming up the stairs. A Taoist priestess appeared. She wore grey Taoist robe with a veil over her face to protect her against the dust. The veil covered her mouth and nose so that only her eyes were visible. The priestess chose a table in the corner and sat down. The wine shop attendant promptly greeted her. The priestess talked in low voice. The wine shop attendant gave his reply and went downstairs. A short moment later he came back with a bowl of vegetable noodle. Huang Rong thought this priestess looked familiar, but she could not figure out where she saw her.

Guo Jing followed her gaze and turned his head toward the priestess, who hastily turned her head around. Apparently the priestess was also looking at him. Huang Rong smiled and whispered, "Jing Gege, that priestess' heart is moved by worldly desire; she must think that you are outstandingly good-looking."

"Pei," Guo Jing spat, "Don't talk nonsense. How can you make fun of 'chu jia ren' [lit. people who leave their homes to become monks or priests]?"

Huang Rong laughed, "If you don't believe me, just wait and see."

They finished eating and walked to the stairs. Huang Rong was still in doubt, she cast another glance toward that priestess, who at that moment lifted up her veil a little bit, revealing her face. Huang Rong gasped and almost cried

out in surprise. The priestess shook her hand, put the veil back down immediately and lowering her head she resumed eating the noodle. Guo Jing had walked down and was oblivious to what was going on.

They went downstairs and settled the bill. The mute boatman was already waiting outside the restaurant door. Huang Rong made several hand signals, saying that they needed to buy some things and would be little bit late coming to the boat. The mute boatman nodded, pointed to a boat with a black sail by the river. Huang Rong nodded, but she saw the boatman did not leave, so she took Guo Jing walking to the eastern end of the road. As they walked to a corner they stopped and hid behind a wall, so that they were not visible from the restaurant while they could still see the restaurant entrance.

Not too long afterwards the priestess left the restaurant; she looked at the little red horse and the pair of eagles nearby. It appeared she was looking for Guo Jing and Huang Rong. After looking at four directions without seeing anybody she turned and walked to the west.

“Right, just as I expected,” Huang Rong said in a low voice. She pulled Guo Jing’s sleeve and hastened to the east. Guo Jing was baffled, but he did not ask any questions, he simply followed her obediently.

The town of Taoyuan was not big; in a short moment they had arrived at the eastern gate. Huang Rong turned around to the south. After passing the southern gate they turned again to the west.

“Are we following that priestess?” Guo Jing asked in a low voice, “Don’t play a joke on me.”

Huang Rong laughed, “What joke?” she said, “The priestess is so beautiful like an angel; if you don’t pursue her you will



regret it later.”

Guo Jing anxiously halted his steps, “Rong’er, if you keep making this kind of talk I will be angry,” he said.

“I am not afraid,” Huang Rong said, “I want to see you mad.”

Guo Jing was dumbfounded; he had no choice but to continue walking. Approximately five, six ‘li’s later they saw in the distant that priestess was sitting underneath a locust tree. As soon as the priestess saw Jing and Rong arrive, she stood up and walked along a small pathway leading to a hill. Huang Rong pulled Guo Jing’s hand and they walked toward the pathway.

“Rong’er,” Guo Jing anxiously said, “If you deliberately want to create trouble, then I’ll have to hold you and drag you back.”

“I am really tired of walking,” Huang Rong said, “I think you’d better follow her by yourself.”

Guo Jing’s face showed a deep concern; he squatted and said, “If you are tired then let me carry you on my back.”

Huang Rong giggled and said, “I am going to pull her veil away so you can take a look at her face.” She sped up her footsteps to pursue the priestess. The priestess turned around, waiting for them. Huang Rong grabbed her veil and uncovered her face.

Guo Jing followed behind, he called out, “Rong’er, don’t create trouble!” But as he saw the priestess’ face he was stunned and was at a loss of words. He saw a deep crease between her beautiful eyebrows, her eyes brimming with tears, her face had a pitiful look; obviously she was in distress. She was none other than Mu Nianci.

Huang Rong hugged her waist, "Mu Jiejie [elder sister Mu], what happened? Did that kid Yang Kang bully you?" she asked. Mu Nianci hang down her head without saying anything.

Guo Jing came near and greeted her, "Sister." Mu Nianci uttered a soft 'mmm' sound.

Huang Rong pulled Mu Nianci's hand toward a weeping willow by a small creek; they sat down underneath the tree. "Sister, how did he bully you?" Huang Rong asked, "We'll find him to settle the score. Brother Jing and I also suffered and our two lives were almost gone under his hands." Mu Nianci lowered her head, still did not say anything. Huang Rong and her images were reflected on the clear creek water. Petals of flowers fell down on the water and slowly floated by, disrupting the reflections.

Guo Jing sat on a rock a few feet apart from the two, his mind was filled with questions: why did Sister Mu dressed as a priestess? Why didn't she greet them at the restaurant? Where did Yang Kang go?

Seeing Mu Nianci's grieving look Huang Rong did not ask anymore questions; she quietly held her hands tight.

After a quite while Mu Nianci opened her mouth, "Meizi [younger sister, term of endearment], Brother Guo, the boat you hired belongs to the Iron Palm Clan. They are setting up a trap to harm you."

Jing and Rong two people were startled; "That mute boatman?" they asked with uneven voices.

"Exactly," Mu Nianci said, "But he is not mute. He is one of the Iron Palm Clan's henchmen, his voice is so loud that he is afraid if he opens his mouth he will rouse your suspicion; hence he pretends to be mute."

Huang Rong was secretly alarmed, "If you did not say I wouldn't see through his disguise," she said, "No wonder this fellow's sign language is very good; he has often disguised himself as a mute many times."

Guo Jing leaped up the willow tree; he swept his gaze around, but other than two, three farmers in the field he did not see anybody else. He thought, "If not because of Rong'er and Sister Mu walked in circle I am afraid the Iron Palm Clan people would be here by now."

Mu Nianci heaved a long sigh and slowly said, "You have already known my affair with Yang Kang. Later on I brought adoptive father's and mother's coffin to the south. I met him again on a desolate place in the Ox Village of Lin'an."

Huang Rong opened her mouth, "That, we also knew; we even saw him killing Ouyang Ke with our own eyes." Mu Nianci looked at her with eyes wide open, Huang Rong's words were hard to believe. Thereupon Huang Rong told her briefly how Guo Jing and she were hiding in the secret room to treat his internal injury, also how Yang Kang had assumed false identity as the Beggar Clan Leader, how two people narrowly escaped danger and so on. It was a long story with all its takes and turns, but Huang Rong was eager to know Mu Nianci's experience, so she only raised the important parts.

Gritting her teeth Mu Nianci said, "This man did all kinds of evil, someday he will not have a good end. I regretted myself to have eyes but failed to see, that I will have to go through all these calamities by unexpectedly meeting him."

Huang Rong groped her pocket for a handkerchief and gently wiped the tears on her cheeks. Mu Nianci's heart was troubled; all kinds of bad things had come her way that in a moment she did not know where to start. She tried to

gather her thoughts and slowly calmed herself down; only then did she open her mouth to tell her story.

**End of Chapter 31.**

# Chapter 32 - Rushing River Rugged Shore

Translated by Frans Soetomo



*The mute boatman took out an axe and with two chops he cut the mooring rope. Immediately afterwards he raised the anchor. As the boat came free, the rushing water washed it out down the river. It made a sudden turn as the hull slanted sideways and rushed away as though flying down the river.*

Mu Nianci let Huang Rong hold her right hand; she looked at the fallen flowers floating on the water and said, "When I saw him kill Ouyang Ke I thought he was going to repent from his evil ways. Moreover I saw the two masters from the Beggar Clan were so respectful toward him when they went to the west. I've met those two Beggar Clan uncles before; they were Senior Qigong's trusted aides. Seeing them treat him that way I was very happy; so I followed them till we get to Yuezhou, where the Beggar Clan was having their congress on Mount Jun.

Before then he quietly told me that he had received Hong Enshi's [Benevolent Master Hong] order to become the Beggar Clan's Bangzhu [Clan Leader]. I was surprised and happy. In all honesty it was hard to believe, but I saw even the highest ranking Elders of the Beggar Clan treat him with utmost respect, I didn't have any choice but to believe him. I am not a member of the Beggar Clan, so naturally I could not participate in the congress and had to wait for him in Yuezhou city. I thought that as he become the leader of the Beggar Clan heroes he would be able to do much good for the people and the country, to achieve great things, and in the future would be able to repel the invaders and avenge adoptive father and mother.

That night my mind went back and forth and I couldn't sleep; I thought from now on everything would be all right. It was almost daybreak when I finally felt tired and was about to fall asleep when suddenly he jumped in from the

window. I jumped in fright; I thought he was having some ideas towards me. But he actually spoke in low voice, 'Meizi [younger sister, term of endearment], things did not go well, we must go.' I was surprised and asked him what happened; he said, 'There was an internal dispute in the Beggar Clan; the Dirty Clothes Faction refused to accept Hong Bangzhu's order. The Clean Clothes Faction and the Dirty Clothes Faction battled each other in this new Clan Leader business; many people were killed.' I was shocked, 'What should we do?' I asked. He said, 'Because too many people has died, I withdrew my nomination, I did not want to become the Clan Leader anymore.' Taking the entire situation into consideration, I thought he was doing the right thing. He said further, 'The Clean Clothes Faction did not want to let me go; fortunately Qiu Bangzhu from the Iron Palm Clan came to my assistance and helped me leave Mount Jun. Right now we'd better go to the Iron Palm Mountain first and we'll talk it over later.' I did not know whether the Iron Palm Clan was a good clan or an evil one; but since he said so, I followed him.

When we got to the Iron Palm Mountain, I did not see the Qiu Bangzhu from the Iron Palm Clan, but I was watched over with cold eyes. I noticed that the Iron Palm Clan's behavior was sneaky, I saw strange things everywhere. I said to him, 'Although you did not become the Beggar Clan leader, you shouldn't walk away from them. I think you'd better find your Shifu, the Changchun Zi [Eternal Spring] Qiu Daozhang [Taoist Priest], and ask him to gather the heroes of the Jianghu to uphold the justice, to help the Beggar Clan elect a person of virtue and prestige within their clan to assume the Clan Leader position to avoid a bloodbath within the clan. Hence you will be fulfilling Hong Enshi's order to you.' He mumbled indistinctly, neither said yes nor no; but actually raised the matter of his marriage

with me. I rebuked him severely; he became angry. We ended up having a heated argument.

The next day I started to regret my harshness; I thought even though he could not differentiate the important from the trivial, friends from foe, and oftentimes acted childish, nevertheless he was always kind to me. I felt I was being too hard on him, no wonder he was mad at me. That evening the more I thought about it the more restless I became. I lit a lamp to write a note, saying I did not blame him. Quietly I went to his room; I was going to slip the note through his window, but suddenly I heard him talking with somebody. I took a peek from the window; I saw a rather short white-bearded old man, he was wearing a yellow coarse-linen short robe, with a large palm leaf fan in his hand."

Guo Jing and Huang Rong exchanged glances, they both thought, "I wonder if he was Qiu Qianren or Qiu Qianzhang?"

Mu Nianci continued, "That old man took a small porcelain vial from his pocket and put it on the table, he said, 'Brother Yang, if your fiancée does not listen to you, that is a very simple matter. Just take some medicinal powder from this vial and put it in a cup of green tea, let her drink it, I guarantee you will enjoy a wedding night tonight.'"

As Jing and Rong two people heard this, they both thought, "It was Qiu Qianzhang."

Mu Nianci continued, "To my surprise that boy Yang Kang beamed with joy and repeatedly said thanks. I was so angry that I almost passed out. A moment later that old man took his leave. Quietly I followed behind him. After it was far enough, I pounced on him, I beat his chest and struck him down. If I were not in a dangerous place, I would've taken a



knife and killed him right then and there. I repeatedly hit him until he passed out, then I searched his body. This old man's pocket really did contain many things; some rings, broken sword, a piece of brick, and all kinds of strange things. I think all of them are things to harm people. I also found a book. I didn't know what it was, but I thought it might be useful somehow, so I put it in my pocket. The more I thought, the madder I became. I made up my mind to deal with Yang Kang.

I went back to Yang Kang's room. Who would have thought that he was standing at the door? He smiled at me and said, 'Meizi, please come in.' Early on I have decided that tonight I must make myself clear to him, so I went in. He pointed to the porcelain vial on the table and smiled, 'Meizi,' he said, 'Can you guess what's inside this vial?' I was angry, 'Who knows all these kinds of dirty things?' I said. He smiled and said, 'A friend gave it to me a moment ago, he said if I take some of this medicinal powder and put it in a cup of green tea and give it to you, then everything will happen as I wish.' His words have actually blown me away, my anger vanished immediately. I took that porcelain vial and threw it out over the window. 'Did you do it?' I asked. 'I respect and adore Meizi like a deity, how can I engage myself in this kind of filthy business?' he replied."

Guo Jing nodded his head, "Brother Yang has done the right thing," he said. "Humph," Mu Nianci snorted but did not say anything. Huang Rong recalled that day on the Iron Palm Mountain she peeked through the window and saw Yang Kang sit on the edge of the bed, embracing her and talking softly with Mu Nianci. At that time Mu Nianci was smiling, her face was tender. Apparently that happened after she threw the vial away.

"And then what happened?" Guo Jing asked. Zhou Botong told him that whenever somebody was telling a story, a 'And

then what happened?’ every now and then would help keep the story-teller’s interest high; but unexpectedly Mu Nianci’s face turned red, she turned her head away and hang her head low without saying anything.

“Ah, I know!” Huang Rong suddenly called out, “Afterwards you bowed to the heaven and earth and became man and wife.”

Mu Nianci turned her head back, actually her face was a little pale; she bit her lower lip and her eyes shone with a strange look. Huang Rong was scared; she knew she said something wrong. “I am sorry, I talked nonsense,” she hastily said, “Good Sister, please don’t be offended.”

Mu Nianci spoke with a low voice, “You did not talk nonsense, it was I who messed up. I ... I have become his wife, but we did not ... we did not bow to the heaven and earth. I hate myself for not having a stronger self control ...” Speaking to this point tears came streaming down her face.

Seeing her miserable look Huang Rong stretched out her left arm to hold her shoulder. She wanted to say something to comfort her so after a while she pointed to Guo Jing and said, “Sister, you don’t have to feel sorry, it was nothing. That day in the Ox Village Jing Gege and I also became man and wife.”

As he heard this, Guo Jing was dumbstruck. He was blushing profusely and did not dare to look up; he only mumbled, “We ... we did not ... did not ...”

Huang Rong laughed, “Don’t tell me you did not think about that?” she asked.

Guo Jing’s face was red from ear to ear; he lowered his head and said softly, “I was not being good.”

Huang Rong stretched her right arm and patted Guo Jing's shoulder. "You want to become man and wife with me, and I like that very much. What do you mean you were not being good?" she said with a gentle voice.

Mu Nianci sighed and thought, "Although Sister Huang is extraordinarily smart, she is too young to understand the man-woman relationship. It is truly fortunate for her to meet such an honest and considerate fellow like this Brother Guo."

"Sister," Huang Rong asked, "And then what happened?"

Mu Nianci looked at the creek and said in low voice, "And then ... and then ... I heard commotion outside, like there was a fight going on. He told me not to make any noise, that it was the Iron Palm Clan's internal affair, it had nothing to do with us. Some time later somebody knocked our door, saying that Qiu Bangzhu wanted to talk. He hastily got up and told me to hide in the bed and not to move. He lit up a lamp and someone came in. I looked through the curtain and to my surprise I saw that bad old man I met a while ago. I was worried to find out that he was the Clan Leader of the Iron Palm Clan; I feared he came to interrogate me about why I plotted against him. How would I know that ... that he was the Clan Leader? Luckily he did not bring this matter up; actually Yang Kang and he discussed things like how to destroy the Beggar Clan and how to support the Jin army movement to the south."

Huang Rong smiled, "Sister, those two old men are not the same person," she said.

"Not the same person?" Mu Nianci was surprised.

Huang Rong laughed, "Those two are twin brothers; they look exactly alike. The one you flattened was called Qiu Qianzhang; his martial art was only so-so, all he could do

was just some tricks to deceive people. This Qiu Bangzhu, Qiu Qianren is amazing. Luckily you beat the fake Clan Leader; if you came across the real Clan Leader, with just one strike of his Iron Palm, I am afraid your little life would be difficult to protect."

"That's so," Mu Nianci gloomily said, "Actually it would be better if I met with the real Qiu Bangzhu that day and if he struck me dead with one palm."

Huang Rong laughed, "Our Brother Yang might not want to give you up," she said.

Mu Nianci twisted her body around so that Huang Rong's hand fell from her shoulder. "Don't talk to me like that," she said sternly.

Huang Rong stuck out her tongue and laughed, "All right, it's me who don't want to give you up."

Mu Nianci stood up and said, "Brother Guo, Sister Huang, I am leaving. You two take care; be careful of the Iron Palm Clan's evil scheme on the boat."

Huang Rong hastily stood up and held her hand. "Good Sister, please don't be angry," she pleaded, "I won't dare to talk nonsense anymore."

Mu Nianci heaved a deep sigh, "I wasn't angry with you, I ... I was grieving."

"Why?" Huang Rong asked, "Did that boy Yang Kang provoke your anger?" She pulled Mu Nianci to sit back down.

Mu Nianci said, "That night from behind the curtain I heard Yang Kang and that old man surnamed Qiu discussing all kind of plans to betray our country and harm the people; the more I heard the angrier I became. I wanted very much

to jump out and kill that old man. They were talking for a long time. Suddenly the commotion outside got louder. That old man said, 'Xiao Wangye [Young Prince, lit. young king master], I am going to take a look. We'll talk again later.' Then he left the room."

"That's right," Huang Rong interrupted, "He went out to pursue Jing Gege and me."

"After that old man left," Mu Nianci continued, "Yang Kang went back to make small talk with me. I asked him whether the things he discussed with that old man was a real thing or was he only pretending. He said, 'We have become man and wife; I don't need to conceal anything from you. It won't be long before the Jin army will invade the south. We have received Iron Palm Clan's great help to strike from both inside and outside. By attacking from two fronts, our victory is guaranteed.' He was talking excitedly. He said that after the Great Jin destroyed the Song Dynasty, his father king, Zhao Wangye [Prince, lit. king master] will ascend to the great treasure, becoming the Emperor of the Great Jin; he will then be the crown prince. By that time riches and honor will be limitless. I listened without saying anything. He suddenly said, 'Meizi, at that time you will be the Empress.' I ... I could not hold my patience much longer; I slapped his face fiercely and ran out the door, anxiously rushed down the mountain.

By then the commotion on the Iron Palm Peak had worsened; countless clan members with torches in their hands rushed toward the highest mountain peak. I was the only one going down the mountain, so I did not meet any resistance.

After this incident my heart felt like it was dying; as a matter of fact, I wanted to die very much. I did not know east from west, north from south, I just kept walking and

walking, wandering aimlessly. Finally I saw a Taoist temple. I rushed toward the temple and barely stepped into the door when I fainted. Fortunately there was an old priestess living in that temple who gave me shelter. I was sick for more than ten days and I just got well not a few days ago. I donned this priestess garb and set on a journey to the Ox Village. Unexpectedly I met with you two here."

Huang Rong was delighted, "Sister, we are on our way to the Peach Blossom Island and happened to go the same way. What do you say the three of us travel together? Then our journey will be more fun. If you don't look down on me, I'll teach you some martial arts along the way."

Mu Nianci shook her head and said, "No, I ... I want to go alone. I appreciate Sister's good intention very much." She stood up, took out a book from her pocket and gave it to Guo Jing; she said, "Brother Guo, this book contains some matters concerning the Iron Palm Clan. Please give it to Senior Qigong whenever you see him; perhaps he will have some use for it."

"Yes," Guo Jing said, holding out his hand to receive the book.

Mu Nianci walked quickly so that in a short moment she was far away; never once did she turn her head around to see them. Guo Jing and Huang Rong watched her back disappear behind a row of willow trees in the distance. They were silent for half a day.

Guo Jing said, "She is all alone, traveling thousands of 'li's to Zhejiang. I do hope she won't meet some bullies along the way. It's a good thing that her martial art is not weak; she does not have to fear ordinary criminals."

"That is difficult to say," Huang Rong said, "Even people like you and I are still bullied by some bad people."

Guo Jing sighed, "Er Shifu [Second Master] often said, 'In a tumultuous time, people are not better than dogs.' There is nothing we can do about it."

"All right, let's kill that mute dog then," Huang Rong said.

"What mute dog?" Guo Jing asked.

Huang Rong made some 'ah, ah, uh, uh' noise, flailing her hands and feet. Guo Jing laughed. "Are we going to ride this mute's boat?" he asked.

"Absolutely," Huang Rong said, "That old traitor Qiu Qianren had caused me a lot of pain, how can I just let it go? I am not his match, but I want to kill some of his disciples and followers first and talk about it later."

They went back to the restaurant immediately, and saw that mute boatman snooping around the restaurant to find them. As he saw them, his face was beaming, he busily greeted them. Jing and Rong two people acted like nothing happened; they followed him boarding the boat.

The boat was not too big nor it was too small, it was covered with black matting; it held around eighty, ninety sacks of rice. This kind of boat was very common along the Yuanjiang [Yuan River], transporting commodities from the hills of Xiangxi and rice from the fields of the lake front. Two bare-chested young men were scrubbing the deck.

As soon as Jing and Rong two people embarked, the boatman untied the rope and pushed the boat to the river, raising the sail. Under the strong southerly wind and following the current, the boat sailed down the river like an arrow. Guo Jing thought about the affair between Yang Kang and Mu Nianci, and could not help but heave a deep sigh. "Yang Kang is my sworn brother," he said in his heart, "We have made a vow to share fortune and disaster. Now

he is making a wrong choice, I cannot ignore it; no matter what, I have to persuade him to leave his evil ways and go back treading the path of righteousness." Leaning against the cabin wall he was lost in thought.

Huang Rong suddenly said, "Let me see the book Sister Mu gave you. I wonder what's written in it."

Guo Jing took the book out of his pocket and gave it to her. Huang Rong flipped the pages, browsing the book. "Ah, so that's how it is!" she suddenly called out, "Take a look here."

Guo Jing moved closer, sat right next to her and read the book in her hand. It was late afternoon, the bright red sunset shone on the river reflecting the ripple of the water on Huang Rong's face, her clothes, and the book in her hand, creating a waving light dancing on her body.

It turned out that the book was written by the thirteenth Clan Leader of the Iron Palm Clan, Shangguan Jiannan; a journal of important events within the Clan year after year. Shangguan Jiannan was formerly a high-ranking army officer serving under General Han Shizhong. After Qin Gui killed Yue Fei, Han Shizhong resigned from his military duty to live as a commoner. Most of his officers and soldiers also returned to civilian lives [jie3 jia3 gui1 tian2 - lit. removed armor return to the (rice) field].

Shangguan Jiannan loathed the way the traitor ministers run the government, so he led a group of brethrens to become outlaws in the Jing Xiang district, and later on they joined the Iron Palm Clan. Not long afterwards the old clan leader died and Shangguan Jiannan took over the clan leader position. The Iron Palm Clan was originally a tiny underworld organization, after he consolidated it, the clan managed to do much chivalrous deeds. A lot of heroes and



warriors around the two Hu's [i.e. Hunan and Hubei] heard of his patriotism and joined the clan so that in a few years the Clan enjoyed equal reputation among the Jianghu people with the Beggar Clan of the north.

Shangguan Jiannan had never forgotten where his loyalty and patriotism lie, although he lived in the wilderness he had never forgotten his duty to defend the country and destroy the enemy, and to restore his homeland; therefore, he frequently dispatched his men to Lin'an, Bianliang and the surrounding areas to gather information, waiting for a good opportunity.

A few years had passed. An Iron Palm Clan brother happened to be a good friend of the warden where Yue Fei was held prisoner. He learned that after Yue Fei was executed, his belongings were confiscated by the government, among which was a book containing military tactics and strategies. He went to many places to inquire and indeed learned that the book was kept in the imperial palace. A fast horse carrying this piece of information was dispatched to the Iron Palm Peak. That very day Shangguan Jiannan led a group of his highly skilled pugilists to enter the palace in the middle of the night and without too much effort they succeeded in stealing the book away. That very night they delivered the book to his former superior, retired general Han Shizhong.

At that time Han Shizhong was already old; he lived in seclusion by the West Lake (Xihu) with his wife, Madame Liang Hongyu. As he saw Shangguan Jiannan bring over the Yue Fei's Legacy he remembered how the hero died of false accusations and the injustice had not been avenged, he drew his sword and chopped a table in front of him. Holding up his wrist he heaved a long sigh.

In memory of his old friend, Han Shizhong compiled Yue Fei's writings: poetry, essays, military strategies, into one volume and presented this volume to Shangguan Jiannan as a gift; with the hope that he would continue Yue Wumu's [another title of Yue Fei] aspiration of uniting the heroes of the Central Plains to drive away the invaders and restore their land [he2 shan1 - lit. river and mountain].

While Han Shizhong and Shangguan Jiannan were talking, they suddenly remembered: everywhere in this military strategy book Yue Fei always exhorted the people's loyalty and patriotism to dedicate themselves to the service of their country to match Yue Fei's life aspiration. This book contained a lesson in life attitude; in no way Yue Fei would write this book to accompany him to the grave. It must be because Qin Gui's tight guard that he was not able to smuggle it outside the prison. However, considering Yue Fei's extraordinary wisdom, he must have had some way to overcome this obstacle; only it was not clear to whom did he leave his final words. If his message came too late, and that person came to the palace to fetch the book, wouldn't he snatch empty air?

After discussing this matter further, Shangguan Jiannan drew a painting of the Iron Palm Mountain, with a piece of paper hidden in between the layers containing this message: 'Wumu's Legacy at the Iron Palm Mountain, middle finger peak, second knuckle'. Han Shizhong was afraid that person will not understand the message, so he added a poem written by Yue Fei in the old days. He thought the heir of this military strategy book must be either Yue Fei's child or younger brother or his former subordinate; so he must be familiar with this poem, therefore, he added some additional details to the painting. Finally Shangguan Jiannan re-entered the palace and left

the painting behind, so that the heir could follow the trail to the Iron Palm Mountain.

Afterwards Shangguan Jiannan returned to the Iron Palm Mountain and assembled a group of patriots to discuss a military expedition to the north. Who would have thought that the government was too afraid of the Jins; not only did they not support this movement, they sent out imperial troops to surround and eventually crush the Iron Palm Clan. After all Iron Palm Clan was smaller and weaker than the army, hence the imperial army managed to break through their defense on the mountain. Shangguan Jiannan himself suffered a heavy injury and eventually died on the Iron Palm Peak.

Guo Jing flipped over the last page and sighed, "I did not think this Shangguan Bangzhu was actually a good man. Up to the point of his death he was still holding dear the Legacy's teachings. I thought he was of the same kind with this Qiu and his brethren; colluding with the Jins and selling our country for his personal gain. I used to despise him very much. If I knew this fact earlier, I would have bowed in front of his remains to show him my respect. I am surprised that the Iron Palm was such a heroic and patriotic Clan in the past, and today it turned into a gang of thieves. If Shangguan Bangzhu's spirit in the underworld knows, he must be very angry."

Meanwhile the sky was turning dark; the boatman cast his anchor nearby a village and went out to butcher the chicken for their dinner. Huang Rong was afraid he might put something into the meal, so with a pretense that she did not want his dirty dishes, she took Guo Jing along and went into the village to find a peasant house and prepare the food herself. The boatman was staring at them angrily, but because he pretended to be mute, he could not openly curse them and was forced to swallow his indignation. He

saw Huang Rong make some hand signals, saying ‘witticism like a bead of pearl, smart tooth like an ivory’ [or something like that ]. He had no way of debating her, so all he could do was clench his teeth and wait until Jing and Rong two people went ashore; only then he went into the cabin and swore under his breath.

After dinner two people enjoyed the cool evening breeze underneath a tree in front of a peasant home. Guo Jing said, “When Shangguan Bangzhu ran to the Iron Palm Peak, why didn’t the imperial army go up the Peak to capture him?”

“I don’t know the answer either,” Huang Rong said, “It is likely the middle finger peak is dangerously rugged, so the soldiers did not want to risk their lives climbing it. Or it could be that some highly skilled Clan members were defending the peak and the soldiers were unable to break through, so they simply declared victory and left.” After a moment of silence Huang Rong continued, “I did not expect Qu Lingfeng, Martial Brother Qu had unintentionally rendered this great service.”

Guo Jing just stared at her with a dumb look. Huang Rong explained, “This ‘Wumu Legacy’ was originally hidden in the cave behind the waterfall near the Cui Han Tang [Jade-Green Cold Hall], Shangguan Jiannan had stolen the book, he drew that painting, naturally he would put the painting on the original place where the book laid, wouldn’t he?”

Guo Jing nodded, “That’s true.”

“After my Qu Shige [martial (older) brother] was expelled from the Peach Blossom Island, he longed for his school to take him back. He knew my father loves calligraphy, paintings and antiques; he also knew that the imperial palace naturally was the best place to find the world’s rarest treasures. Therefore, he took a risk by entering the

palace and robbed not a few of famous paintings, calligraphy, books ...”

“That’s right, that’s right,” Guo Jing cut her off, “Your Qu Shige stole this painting together with others artworks, and stashed it away inside that secret chamber in the Ox Village. He meant to present them all to your father; unfortunately he was killed by a palace guard. And then when that old traitor Wanyan Honglie came, not only the Wumu Legacy was gone, the painting containing the directions to find it was also gone. Ay, if we knew this early on, we did not need to desperately risking our lives defending the cave; I wouldn’t be injured by the Old Poison, and you did not need to worry for seven whole days and nights.”

“That’s not necessarily true,” Huang Rong said, “If you did not treat your injury inside that secret room in the Ox Village, how could you have seen the painting? Also how could ...” Suddenly she recalled seeing Huazheng in the Ox Village, she could not help but feel depressed. Trying to change the subject she said, “I wonder how father is doing these past few days?” Looking up she saw the crescent moon on the horizon. “Very soon it will be Mid-autumn festival of the eight month. After the martial art contest at the Misty Rain Tavern of Jiaying, are you going back to Mongolia?” she gently asked.

“No,” Guo Jing replied, “I must kill the traitor Wanyan Honglie first, to avenge my father and Uncle Yang.”

Staring at the moon Huang Rong asked again, “After you kill him, then what?”

“We still have many businesses to tend,” Guo Jing said, “I want to treat Shifu’s injury then I want to take Zhou Dage [Big Brother Zhou] to the Black Marsh to see Ying Gu. And

there are my six Shifus, I want to go and visit them one by one at their homes. I also want to find my father's grave."

"And after you take care of all these business, must you go back to Mongolia?" Huang Rong asked.

Guo Jing could not say he must go, but he also could not say he would not go; in all honesty he did not know what would be the best thing to do.

All of a sudden Huang Rong laughed and said, "Silly me, why should I worry about all these things? As long as we are together, an hour of happiness must be enjoyed for a full hour. As we go through one day, we will have one less of these kind of happy days. Let us go back to the boat and play a joke on that fake mute boatman."

At the time the two returned to the boat, the boatman and his two helpers had actually fallen asleep on the stern. Guo Jing whispered on Huang Rong's ear, "Go ahead and sleep, I am going to watch over them."

Huang Rong said with a low voice, "I'll teach you some curse words in sign languages; tomorrow you can show them to him."

"Why don't you do it yourself?" Guo Jing asked.

Huang Rong chuckled lightly, "Those are vulgar language; a girl from an honorable family shouldn't say those kind of words."

"It turns out mute people can curse others too," Guo Jing said in his heart; but his mouth said, "Go and take a rest now; it won't be too late to curse him tomorrow." After recovering from her injury Huang Rong had not gotten her strength back. In all honesty she was tired, so she put her head down on Guo Jing's legs and slowly she fell asleep.

Initially Guo Jing was thinking of meditating to cultivate his internal energy, but he was afraid the boatman might be suspicious, so he decided to lie down on the cabin deck, silently reciting the theory of energy cultivation from the Nine Yin Manual, which Reverend Yideng translated from Sanskrit. Then he practiced according to the theory for about an hour and he felt his four limbs and all the bones in his body were full of energy. He was delighted. Suddenly he heard Huang Rong mumbled, "Jing Gege, don't marry the Mongolian Princess; I want to be your wife."

Guo Jing was startled, he did not know how to answer her; but then he heard Huang Rong said again, "No, no. I was wrong; I don't want anything. I know in your heart you love me very much, and that is enough for me."

"Rong'er, Rong'er," Guo Jing called in a low voice. But Huang Rong did not reply, her breathing was even, apparently she was sleeping. Turned out she was talking in her sleep. Guo Jing felt deep affection and pity toward her at the same time. He started blankly at Huang Rong's face illuminated by the moonlight. She was just starting to recover from her injury, her face was still pale and under the moonlight it looked like her face was translucent. Guo Jing stared at her for a long time. He saw her eyebrows wrinkle slightly and there were drops of tears in her eyes. Guo Jing said in his heart, "She must be dreaming of the challenges we are facing. All day she acted like she was carefree, laughing and joking, but in her heart she actually was grieving. Ay, it was I who caused her worries. I wish we did not meet at Zhangjiakou, then her life would be better. But what about me? Would I be willing to give her up?"

One was sleeping with a sad dream, the other was awake with heavy heart; suddenly he heard the water ripple, a boat was coming downstream. Guo Jing thought, "The terrain of this River Yuan is so rugged; what kind of boat is

so daring as to travel here in the middle of the night?" He was about to poke his head out of the cabin to take a look when suddenly from the stern of his own boat came three clapping sounds. The clapping was very light, but in the stillness of the night the sound traveled far on the surface of the water. He then heard the sound of a sail being lowered and the oars paddling the water. That incoming boat came closer to the right hand side riverbank and slowly positioned near their boat. A short moment later it was side to side with the boat Guo Jing rode.

Guo Jing gently patted Huang Rong to wake her up; he felt the hull shook slightly. Quickly he raised the cabin covering to look outside, right in time to see a dark shadow leaping from his boat to the incoming boat. Judging from the appearance, that shadow looked like the mute boatman.

"I'll go over to take a look, you stay and guard here," Guo Jing said. Huang Rong nodded.

Guo Jing crouched and stealthily walked to the bow; he saw that the incoming boat was swaying on the water, he leaped and landed on the horizontal part of the sail mast, which happened to be the center of gravity of the boat. The hull slightly sunk in, but the inclination of the boat did not change one bit; nobody on that boat noticed. He opened his eyes wide, trying to see through some openings on the cabin's roof. He saw three men standing in the cabin; they wore the black uniform of the Iron Palm Clan. One of them was quite tall; he was wearing a green cloth wrapped around his head, looked like he was the leader.

Guo Jing's movement was so quick that even though that pretend-to-be-mute boatman leaped to this boat first, by this time he was just entering the cabin. He cupped his fists and greeted the tall man, "Leader Qiao."



“Those two little thieves are still in?” Leader Qiao asked.

“Yes,” the boatman replied.

“Do they have any suspicion?” Leader Qiao asked again.

“No suspicion,” the boatman replied, “But those two thieves did not want to dine on board, so I did not have any chance to do anything.”

“Humph,” Leader Qiao said, “They are going to die at the ‘qing long tan’ [green dragon shore]. The day after tomorrow at noon you will arrive at the Green Dragon Shore. About three ‘li’s from the beach is the Green Dragon Village. Break the boat’s rudder there; we will be waiting for you.”

The boatman gave his reply. Leader Qiao continued, “Those two little thieves are very skilled in martial arts, you must be very careful. After the successful completion of this mission our Bangzhu will heap you with generous reward. Now go back from the water, don’t rock the boat and alert them.”

“Yes,” the boatman replied, “Do you have further instructions, Leader Qiao?”

“No,” Leader Qiao waved his hand. The boatman cupped his fists again and retreated; he went down the water from the side of the boat and quietly swam back.

Guo Jing leaped from the mast back to his own boat and told Huang Rong everything he just heard. Huang Rong smiled coldly and said, “We have been through Reverend Yideng’s torrential stream going up the mountain; why should we be scared away by Green Dragon Rugged Shore or White Tiger Rugged Shore? Let’s sleep.”

Their minds were at ease knowing the bandits' plot. The next day they enjoyed the scenery light-heartedly; and had a good rest in the evening, did not even bother to keep a night watch. Early morning the third day the boatman was about to raise the anchor when suddenly Huang Rong said, "Hold on, let the horse come ashore first, otherwise it will die when the boat capsizes at the Green Dragon Shore."

The boatman's face changed slightly, which could not be disguised. Huang Rong raised her both hands, she could not help to 'say' several vulgar words to curse him. Each one of the deaf and mute servants of the Peach Blossom Island was a criminal; their skills at cursing people were naturally above average. When Huang Rong started learning those words, she did not understand their real meaning. This time two of her left fingers made a circle, carrying a vulgar sense; with a giggle she let her hand dropped; and then she came alongside Guo Jing taking the horse ashore.

Suddenly Guo Jing said, "Rong'er, let's not play around with them anymore. We leave the boat and ride the horse from here."

"Why?" Huang Rong asked.

Guo Jing replied, "These Iron Palm Clan people are criminals, why should we squabble with them? As long as we can live together peacefully, we don't have to prove that we are stronger."

"Can we live together peacefully forever?" Huang Rong asked. Guo Jing was silent. He saw Huang Rong loosen the little red horse's rein and point to the north. The little red horse had a divine intelligence, it had been separated from its master several times and right now understood that its masters wanted to part again temporarily. Without

hesitation it ran to the north and in a short moment its shadow could not be seen anymore.

Huang Rong clapped her hands, "Let's get on board."

"You are not fully recovered yet," Guo Jing said, "Must you brave the danger?"

"You can't just let it go," Huang Rong replied and walked the downward slope toward the boat. Guo Jing had no other choice but follow her to the boat. Huang Rong smiled, "Sha gege [dumb older brother], we have been through many strange and fantastic adventures together. Someday when we are not together anymore, we will have many memories we can cherish, wouldn't that be good?"

"In the future, must we ... must we really part?" Guo Jing stammered. Huang Rong stared at him but did not say anything. Guo Jing did not have the slightest idea until today that when at the Ox Village he promised Tuolei he would marry Huazheng he had caused a deep wound in Huang Rong's heart.

It was almost noon; they have been sailing for a few hours. The further they went, the steeper and steeper the banks became on both sides of the River Yuan. The Green Dragon Shore must be not too far ahead. Jing and Rong two people stood on the bow looking into the distance. They saw that the passing boats were pulled by porters on the banks. Big boats needed more than a dozen men, while the smallest boats needed three, four men. The porters were stooping down at their waists, at several places their foreheads were almost touching the ground; step by step they pulled the boats upstream against the strong current, sometimes as if the boats were motionless, dead as a nail.

The porters wore white headbands, their upper bodies naked, with beads of sweats trickling down their bronze

skins, glittering under the bright hot sun; their mouths shouted heave-ho. Several 'li's up and down the river the valley was full of their continuous shouts. With these porters' help the boats were able to move gently and rapidly through the rushing water.

Seeing this Guo Jing was secretly alarmed, he came near Huang Rong and in a low voice said, "Rong'er, I did not know there is such a dangerous part on the Yuan River; we must never let our guards down. It looks to me that the rushing water covers quite some distance. If our boat capsizes while you are not completely fit, I am afraid we'll face disaster."

"What do you think we should do?" Huang Rong asked.

"Overthrow the mute boatman, steer the boat to the shore," Guo Jing replied.

Huang Rong shook her head, "That is not fun."

"At a time like this you still want to have fun?" Guo Jing anxiously said.

Huang Rong pursed her lips and smiled, "I love to play!"

Looking at the muddy water between the steep river banks, Guo Jing saw the current was very strong. Frantically he tried to think some way out of this, but he was slow, what could he possibly come out with?

Ahead of them, there was a bent on the river. In the distance they saw several dozens of houses by the river banks. The houses were scattered high and low on the side of the hill. The current carried the boat rapidly along the river, swifter than a running horse, so that in a short moment they had arrived near those houses. They saw that several dozens of porters were waiting along the bank. The

mute boatman tossed a couple of ropes from the boat to the shore. The porters took the ropes and wound them around a big capstan. More than a dozen porters turned the capstan, pulling the boat closer to the shore. This boat was of a very good size, it required about thirty men huffing and puffing to pull it ashore. As they were done, some of the porters lied down by the water, exhausted; it looked like they were unable to move again.

Guo Jing thought, "It looks like the undercurrent is much stronger than on the surface." He saw among the porters were some old men with grey hair, yet some of them were youngsters of fourteen, fifteen years of age; all of them were so thin that their ribs were visible. Suddenly Guo Jing realized that everybody in the world had to work hard to earn a living; his throat choked up involuntarily.

As the boat was ashore, the boatman dropped out the anchor. Guo Jing saw there were more than twenty boats that also dropped their anchors on the nearby bank. Huang Rong asked a man standing nearby, "Brother, what is this place?"

"Green Dragon Village," that man replied.

Huang Rong nodded. She kept a close attention to the mute boatman. She saw him make some hand signals with a big man standing on the sloping bank. Suddenly the boatman took out an axe and with two chops he cut the mooring rope. Immediately afterwards he raised the anchor. As the boat became free, the rushing water washed it out down the river. It made a sudden turn until the hull slanted sideways and flushed away like flying down the river. The people on the shore cried out in alarm.

After the Green Dragon Shore the riverbed changed abruptly, creating a short waterfall. The river current was

so strong that water was splashing everywhere. The mute boatman kept his hands on the rudder, with eyes steadily fixed on the surface of the river. His two helpers held long punting poles in their hands, standing on the either side of him. It seemed like they were guarding against the boat from having an accident, but it also looked like they were protecting the boatman from Jing and Rong, two people's attack.

Guo Jing saw that the current was getting stronger and stronger, the boat sailed like crazy; it could smash against a rock any moment and would certainly break. "Rong'er, snatch the rudder!" he loudly called out and ran to the stern.

The two helpers heard his shout; they raised the poles up and blocked Guo Jing from both sides. Guo Jing ignored these two; he kept going toward the starboard.

"Hold on!" suddenly he heard Huang Rong shouted.

Guo Jing halted his steps and turned his head, "Why?"

With a low voice Huang Rong said, "Are you forgetting about our eagles? We'll wait for the boat to capsize then we'll fly away with the eagles. I want to see what they are going to do."

Guo Jing was delighted, he thought, "No wonder Rong'er is not scared of this torrential river; she has already thought about it early on." He then beckoned to the pair of eagles to land on his sides.

The mute boatman saw Guo Jing came rushing toward him but suddenly stop dead on his tracks; he did not know that those two had already prepared an escape plan. He thought these two babies, who were still wet behind their ears, were

helplessly frightened by the rushing river that they did not know what to do. Inwardly he was very happy.

Amidst the rumbling sound of the water they could hear the heave-ho of the porters in the distance. A moment later they saw another boat similar to their own was pulled against the current; a black flag was fluttering from this incoming boat's mast. As the mute boatman saw this boat, he raised his axe and with several cracking sound he hacked down the tiller; and then he stood at the port side, ready to jump toward the incoming boat.

Guo Jing pressed down the female eagle's back and called out, "Rong'er, you go first!"

"No need to rush!" Huang Rong replied. Suddenly an idea came into her mind, "Jing Gege, throw the anchor to that boat." Guo Jing complied and snatched the anchor.

By now their boat had already lost its rudder, it floated along the fierce current uncontrollably. Very soon the distance between two boats was only a little over one 'zhang' [about 3 meters or 10 feet]. The incoming boat changed its course to avoid collision. The men on the incoming boat, together with the porters on the hill shouted in alarm. Guo Jing threw the anchor with all his might; the iron anchor flew and hit the pole where the towing rope was tied on the bow of the incoming boat.

The tow rope was made of several hundreds 'zhang's of bamboo fibers tightly braided together; it was strung tight like the string of a bow. The iron anchor hit the pole squarely and with a loud 'crack' it broke into two pieces. Dozens of porters were pulling the rope with all their might; as the pole broke, they tumbled down to the ground. The incoming boat was like a kite with its string broken; the strong current turned it around so that its stern faced

forward and its bow faced backward, it was flushed away downstream. Everybody shouted in alarm; their voices reverberated on the surrounding hills above the noise of the rushing river.

The mute boatman was taken by surprise; his face turned deathly pale and with a loud voice he screamed, "Hey! Help! Help!"

Huang Rong laughed, "The mute can speak, it truly is a wonder of the world."

Guo Jing had thrown one anchor away; the boat still had one more anchor. He saw that their boat and the incoming boat floated together almost side by side at a very close distance. He took a deep breath and lifted the other anchor, turned his body around three times and hurled the anchor toward the rudder of the incoming boat. He was sure the anchor would hit the rudder and then both boats would be completely destroyed; but suddenly somebody leaped in front of the cabin. That person snatched the long punting pole and shook it toward the handle of the anchor. He exerted his strength toward the pole and made it bent like a bow. 'Crack!' the pole broke; but the anchor's trajectory was also diverted. With a loud splash both the anchor and the half punting pole fell into the water.

The person holding the pole wore a short yellow coarse robe, his white beard curled to his ear, blown by the river wind. Even though the boat was violently jolted by the water, he was standing steadily on the deck. His presence brought an impressive air around him. He was none other than the Clan Leader of the Iron Palm Clan, Qiu Qianren.

Seeing Qiu Qianren on the boat Guo Jing and Huang Rong were startled. They have not recovered from the shock when suddenly there was a loud crashing sound; the bow of



their boat was colliding with a reef. The crash was so hard that two people were sent flying until their backs hit the cabin door.

The boat sank so fast that in a short moment the water had risen to their ankles; they did not have enough time even if they wanted to escape by riding the eagles. In this critical moment Guo Jing acted without thinking; he flew forward and called out, "Follow me!" With the 'dragon flies to the sky' he threw his body toward Qiu Qianren. He knew at this moment the difference between life and death was only as wide as a hair strand; if he landed someplace else on the enemy's boat, Qiu Qianren would definitely make a surprise attack from the side. With his power right now he knew he would be able to bear that attack, but it would compel him to take the defensive and would not give him any chance to set a foothold on the enemy's boat.

Qiu Qianren was fully aware of his intention; he swung the broken pole in his hands to stab several points on Guo Jing's body in the air, forcing him to change his direction and not land on the boat. Guo Jing inwardly groaned, "Not good!" Stretching his arm toward the pole his body continued falling toward the enemy's boat; but because of this the 'dragon flies to the sky' lost its momentum.

With a long laughter Qiu Qianren let the pole go and his palm struck toward Guo Jing's chest. With him standing steadily on the deck while the enemy was in the air, and his palm striking up, the enemy would be forced to plunge into the water. But before the pole fell, another bamboo stick intercepted it, and borrowing the momentum someone was leaping to the boat; it was Huang Rong. Before the person landed, her stick had already arrived, striking downward three times with killer strikes. Qiu Qianren did not anticipate she was capable of moving this fast; his left eye

was in danger of being poked, so he had no choice but immediately withdrew his palm.

Guo Jing seized the opportunity to land on the bow and immediately launched a converging attack. Qiu Qianren did not dare to underestimate this attack, he moved sideways to evade the bamboo stick, while his right leg swept away, forcing Guo Jing to retreat one step; and then 'swish, swish' both of his palms struck out.

How can Iron Palm martial art be ordinary? The Iron Palm Clan built their headquarters on a mountain and for the last several hundred years its power and prestige spread over the Central Plains; it was all because of the exquisiteness of their palm technique. Shangguan Jiannan and Qiu Qianren added even many more subtle variations and refined the stances. Although its overwhelming power was inferior to the 'Eighteen Dragon Subduing Palms', but its palm technique was ingenious and finer than the 'Eighteen Dragon Subduing Palms'.

In a short moment two men had exchanged seven, eight stances on the bow of the boat. Although they were wary of each other, their palms and feet did not stop moving. The noise of the rushing water was loud, but it could not cover the strong gusts of wind from the four palms.

By now an Iron Palm Clan member had taken over the rudder, slowly steering the boat on the right direction so that they were swiftly floating downstream. The mute boatman's boat had already broken into two sections; the planks, the sail, the mute boatman and his two helpers were marooned on a big silt in the middle of the river with vortex of water all around them. The mute boatman's miserable cry for help could be heard from a distance; surely his voice was loud and clear.

Huang Rong busily waved her left hand behind her back, making a hand signal, 'scolding' the mute boatman. In any case nobody was watching her, so she could be as vulgar as she wished.

Even though the mute boatman and his two helpers were holding to the silt for their dear lives, the vortex was too strong; in a blink of an eye they were sucked into the bottom of the river.

The black-flagged boat was floating swiftly so that when Huang Rong turned her head around, they were already two, three 'li's away from the vortex. The pair of eagles was flying in circles above them, continuously crying. Huang Rong wielded her bamboo stick to push the Iron Palm Clan people from the bow; she intended to help Guo Jing fight Qiu Qianren. Suddenly with the corner of her eye she caught a flash of a blade inside the cabin, somebody was about to chop something inside. Without knowing clearly what it was, her left hand launched a steel needle, hitting that person's arm. That person's saber fell and slashed his own right thigh, and he screamed loudly.

Huang Rong rushed into the cabin, lifted up her leg to kick him out of the way, only to see someone was lying on the deck; with all her hands and feet bound that she could not move. Her cold eyes were staring at Huang Rong; she was the Divine Mathematician Ying Gu.

Never in her life did Huang Rong expect to save Ying Gu's life in this place. She picked the saber from the deck and cut of the ropes binding Ying Gu's hands. As soon as her hands were free Ying Gu stretched out her right hand and snatched the saber from Huang Rong's hand. Huang Rong was startled; she saw the blade flash and Ying Gu had killed that black-dressed man. Only then did she stoop down to cut off the ropes on her own feet.

“Although you have saved my life, don’t expect me to repay you in the future,” she said.

Huang Rong smiled. “Who wants you to repay?” she said, “You have saved my life, and today I saved yours. Now we are even, nobody owes anybody anything.”

Before she finished speaking she had dashed forward to the bow with her bamboo stick to help Guo Jing. Qiu Qianren was attacked from both front and rear; he increased the strength of his palms, trying to stay on the offensive side. But then he heard ‘splash, splash’ and ‘aiyo, aiyo’ successively; Ying Gu with saber in her hand had attacked the Iron Palm Clan people and forced them to fall into the river. In this turbulent water they could not expect to keep their lives.

Initially when he was fighting Guo Jing, Qiu Qianren had gradually gained an upper hand; but now Huang Rong came to Guo Jing’s rescue with her Dog Beating Stick technique, he was alone against two enemies. A dozen or so stances later he was forced to move back around the boat defending himself. His back was facing the water so that Huang Rong could not attack him from behind.

Guo Jing launched several fierce attacks successively, but Qiu Qianren’s feet were as if nailed to the deck, he could not be pushed further even for half an inch. By now he was so close to the edge that one more step backward would make him fall into the river.

Huang Rong said in her heart, “Although your title is ‘Iron Palm Floating on the Water’, but with the ‘floating on the water’ part you are merely boasting your excellent lightness kungfu. Not to mention this turbulent water and wild waves of this river, even on a mirror-like calm lake you won’t be able to float on the water; unless you have

mastered your older brother's trick by planting several thousands or several hundreds wooden stakes under the water beforehand." She noticed that while his palms moved steadily, his eyes were repeatedly scanning the water; it seemed like he was hoping another boat would come to his rescue. She thought, "This old fellow's martial art skill might be high; but with three against one today, if we cannot defeat you, we can consider ourselves as dung."

By then Ying Gu had swept the boat clean of all Iron Palm Clan people, except the man who control the rudder. She saw Guo Jing and Huang Rong could not gain an upper hand, she coldly said, "Little girl, move away, I am coming!"

Hearing the condescending tone in her remarks Huang Rong could not help but be angry; her bamboo stick moved forward and she launched two stances successively; while her feet kept moving forward. When Qiu Qianren stepped aside to evade, she leaped backward two steps while pulling Guo Jing's sleeve and said, "Let her fight." Guo Jing used his palm to guard then he pulled back.

Ying Gu coldly said, "Qiu Bangzhu, your reputation in Jianghu cannot be considered small, but while I was resting in an inn unguarded you used incense to drug me. It was low, even for you."

"You are captured by my subordinates, what else do you have to say?" Qiu Qianren replied, "If I personally went into action, using only this pair of hands I would be able to capture even ten Divine Mathematicians."

Ying Gu coldly said, "When did I ever offend the Iron Palm Clan?"

Qiu Qianren replied, "These two little thieves without authorization broke into our Iron Palm Peak's holy ground; why did you give them asylum at the Black Marsh? I spoke

nicely to you asking you to release them, but you dared to lie to me; do you think I, Qiu Qianren, am an easygoing person?"

"Ah, turns out it was because of these two little thieves," Ying Gu said, "If you have the ability, go and get them; I won't mind other people's business anymore." After saying that she went back several steps and sat cross-legged on the side of the boat, her face looked indifferent; it seemed like she determined to watch the tigers fight, expected Jing and Rong two people and Qiu Qianren to suffer injury. Her action was truly unexpected by Qiu Qianren, Guo Jing and Huang Rong.

It turned out that when her plan to assassinate Reverend Yideng was thwarted by Guo Jing in disguise, and then seeing Yideng bare his chest to her, suddenly she realized Yideng's kindness to her and she did not have a heart to make a move. She went down the mountain dejectedly, with memory of the tragic death of her son lingering in her mind. She stopped by at an inn to spend the night; confusion, anger and resentment filling her heart, putting her in a very vulnerable situation. Right at that time the Iron Palm Clan people used incense to drug her. Otherwise, with her skill and intelligence, how could she fall into the hands of some lowly, nameless juniors? Right now she saw Guo Jing, Huang Rong, two people, she wanted to vent her anger and frustration by hoping those three people all die in this rushing river.

Huang Rong thought, "All right, we will cope with Qiu Qianren first, we'll deal with you later." She made a facial signal to Guo Jing and two people, one with a bamboo stick, the other with his pair of palms, attacked Qiu Qianren side by side. In a moment three people were engaged in a fierce an inextricable combat.

Ying Gu watched the fight with rapt attention. She saw that even though Qiu Qianren's palm technique was swift and fierce, in the end it would be difficult for him to score victory against these couple. She noticed Qiu Qianren kept moving step by step; it looked like he was trying to defeat the enemies by a surprise attack.

Guo Jing was concerned over Huang Rong's condition; her serious injury had just recovered, she might lose her strength if this fight was prolonged. "Rong'er," he said, "Take a rest for a while, then you can come back to help me later."

"All right!" Huang Rong said with a smile. She raised her stick and withdrew from the fight.

Ying Gu saw the closeness of these two people; Guo Jing loved Huang Rong very much. "Throughout my life, when did someone treat me this way?" she thought. From envy she became jealous, from jealousy came hatred. Suddenly she stood up and called out, "Two against one, what kind of skill is that? Come, let us four people fight in two pairs to determine victory or defeat." She reached into her pocket with both of her hands and took out two bamboo planks. Without waiting for Huang Rong to reply the pair of planks went down vertically and swept away horizontally, attacking Huang Rong.

"You are a crazy old woman," Huang Rong cursed her; "No wonder the Old Urchin did not love you."

Ying Gu raised her eyebrows and intensified her attacks. Once she went into action, the situation on the boat changed considerably. Although Huang Rong's Dog Beating Stick technique was exquisite, her internal energy level was still inferior to Ying Gu's; not to mention after a heavy injury her internal strength had not fully recovered, her

movements were not as agile as they used to be. She had to rely on the 'sealing' technique with all her strength to barely guard herself against the enemy. Ying Gu was slippery as a fish, the jolting and swaying of the boat only added to her fierceness.

On the other front Guo Jing fought Qiu Qianren; for a while it would be difficult to decide victory and defeat. After receiving instructions from Reverend Yideng on the internal energy cultivation his level of energy actually increased one layer; to his own surprise by exerting all his strength he was able to protect himself thus far. On the other hand Qiu Qianren was baffled by Ying Gu's action; first she acted as his enemy and did not care to help either side, suddenly now she came to lend him a hand. Inwardly he was delighted, his spirit rose and his palms became fiercer. He believed with a prolonged fight he would eventually subdue Guo Jing.

Qiu Qianren saw Guo Jing's palm wipe out fiercely, he leaned sideways to avoid a frontal attack, his right palm high, left palm low, they clapped down together. Guo Jing responded by stretching out his palms and four palms collided with a great force. "Hey!" two people shouted together and both withdrew three steps.

Qiu Qianren stumbled toward the stern and grabbed the rudder to steady himself. Guo Jing's left foot tripped on a rope and he nearly tumbled down. Afraid of the enemy's subsequent attack while his defense line was empty he continued by rolling down on the deck while readied his palms to protect his body. Qiu Qianren thought victory was at hand, watching the enemy tumble down and at a disadvantage he let out a long laugh and stepped forward.

In the meantime Ying Gu had succeeded in making Huang Rong huffing and puffing, panting for breath; she saw



beads of sweat trickling down her forehead, she was delighted. Suddenly she heard the laughter, she was greatly shocked; her countenance abruptly changed and absentmindedly she withdrew the attack with the bamboo plank in her left hand.

Huang Rong saw this opportunity and she did not want to miss it; the bamboo stick in her hand turned to attack Ying Gu's chest. But as the bamboo stick was about to hit the 'shen cang' [divine storage] acupoint on her chest, Ying Gu's body shook as if she was suffering from a sudden illness. "So it was you!" Ying Gu screamed and pounced toward Qiu Qianren like a mad tiger.

Qiu Qianren saw her with arms opened wide, fiercely throwing herself at him without any regard for her own life. Her mouth opened wide exposing rows of white teeth, as if she wanted to bite him alive. Although his martial art skill was high, seeing this disregarding-her-own-life kind of attack he could not help but was startled. Hastily he leaped sideways to evade and called out, "What are you doing?"

Ying Gu did not answer; she kept throwing herself on him. As soon as her feet landed, she would pound him again and again. Qiu Qianren struck with his left palm toward her head, but Ying Gu kept going with arms extended as if she wanted something; she completely ignored the incoming attack, still ferociously trying to throw herself at him. Qiu Qianren was shocked; he thought if he was caught by this insane woman, he would not be able to break free easily, and if at that time Guo Jing came up with a palm, how could he still alive? Therefore, he abandoned his palm strike immediately; saving his own life was more important, hastily he ducked to the left.

Huang Rong pulled Guo Jing's hand; they moved to the side. Seeing Ying Gu suddenly lost her mind they could not help

but feel scared. They saw Ying Gu madly pounced forward, her mouth let out 'heh, heh' sound, her lips opened to reveal her teeth, trying to embrace Qiu Qianren without regard of her own life.

Although Qiu Qianren's martial art skill was high, but Ying Gu attacked him like she did not want to live anymore, he could not keep up with her; he was forced to dodge to the west and evade to the east. He saw the muscle on her face twitch, her expression so ferocious, he became more and more afraid. "Revenge, revenge!" he inwardly groaned, "Today I will die under this mad woman's hands."

Ying Gu pounced several more times, Qiu Qianren evaded her until he arrived next to the rudder. Ying Gu's eyes were red as if they were going to spurt blood. One more time her grab missed its target. She raised her palm and 'bang!' she struck the man controlling the rudder throwing him into the river; then her leg flew and she kicked the rudder broken. The boat immediately floated chaotically as it lost its rudder.

Huang Rong groaned inwardly, "This woman was going to turn mad sooner or later; it seems that we, four people, will have difficulty escaping death this time." Immediately she pursed her lips and whistled loudly to summon the eagles down to save their lives.

Right at this moment the boat hit a big rock. With a loud crashing sound a big hole appeared on the bow. As Qiu Qianren saw Ying Gu break the rudder he knew she had made up her mind to die together with him. He saw the shore was not too far; he thought whether dead or alive he must risk everything to escape; therefore, he jumped toward the shore with all his might. But the shore was still a distance away, 'splash!' he fell into the water and immediately drowned to the bottom of the river. He was

aware that as soon as he went up to the surface, the strong current would flush him away and it would be impossible for him to struggle free; hence he firmly held onto the rock at the bottom of the river and using his hands and feet he crawled underwater toward the shore. Utilizing his outstanding martial art, plus the fact that near the shore the current was not as strong as at the middle of the river, although he had to swallow about a dozen mouthful of water, he finally reached the shore. He was utterly exhausted, he sat on a rock to catch his breath and saw the boat quickly turned into a black dot in the distance. Remembering Ying Gu's clenched teeth and scary expression he shivered in fear.

As Ying Gu saw Qiu Qianren jump out the boat she loudly called out, "Evil thief, where are you running to?" She rushed toward the side of the boat, ready to jump into the water. But by then the boat had been flushed to the middle of the river where the current was strongest; in this dangerous billows, how would she survive if she really jumped into the water?

Guo Jing could not bear to see her; he rushed forward to grab her back. Ying Gu was angry, she reached behind her back to attack. Guo Jing hastily ducked to evade. Huang Rong saw the pair of eagles had landed in front of the cabin. "Brother Jing," she called out, "Why do you mind this mad woman? Let us go quickly."

The water violently surged up and very soon it rose up to their ankles. Guo Jing let his grab went loose. Ying Gu covered her face with both hands, crying loudly. "Child! Child!" she shouted miserably.

Huang Rong repeatedly urged him to go, but Guo Jing remembered Reverend Yideng's request to look after Ying

Gu. "Go ashore with the eagle, then send them back here to rescue us," he called out.

"There's not enough time," Huang Rong anxiously objected.

"Go, quick!" Guo Jing said, "We can't neglect Reverend Yideng's entrusting."

Huang Rong recalled Yideng's kindness in saving her life, reluctantly she mounted the eagle, knowing she did not have any choice. Suddenly her body shook. With a violent crash the boat hit a big reef in the middle of the river. The water bubbled up toward the cabin, in a flash the hull sank several feet.

"Jump to the reef!" Huang Rong called out. Guo Jing nodded, he went over to take Ying Gu along.

By then Ying Gu was in daze, she knew Guo Jing held out his hand to hold her, she did not resist. Her eyes were staring blankly at the river. Guo Jing slipped his right hand under her armpit and called out, "Jump!" Three people jumped to the reef.

That reef was actually about a foot under the water; the river surrounded three people, splashing their clothes wet. When they stood firm on the reef, they saw the boat slowly sank beside them. Although she had played in the great waves since her childhood, but seeing the muddy water swirling around her Huang Rong could not restrain from having a dizzy spell; she raised her head up looking at the sky, did not dare to look directly into the water.

Guo Jing whistled to call the eagles to come and carry them over; but the eagles were afraid of the water. They flew in circles overhead but did not dare to set their feet on the submerged reef.

Huang Rong looked around and saw a big willow tree on the bank toward their left, about a dozen 'zhang's away. Immediately she had an idea, "Jing Gege," she said, "Hold my hand." Guo Jing took a good grip of her left hand. With a splash Huang Rong disappeared into the water.

Guo Jing was startled; he saw she dove to the sunken boat, he quickly stooped down until his upper body also went into the water. He extended his arm as far as possible while his legs firmly gripped a sticking rock on the reef. With all his strength his right hand gripped her left wrist, lest the current was too strong and he lost his grip, then she might never be able to come up.

Huang Rong dove toward the mast; she pulled down the sail rope, then wound it around the reef. Next, her hands alternately pulled the sail rope until she got about twenty 'zhang's of rope; then she took out her dagger and cut the rope down. Afterwards she extended her arm, calling the female eagle to perch on her shoulder.

By now the pair of eagles was grown and they were quite heavy. Guo Jing was afraid Huang Rong could not take it, so he extended his arm to take the eagle. Huang Rong wound the end of the rope to the female eagle's foot, she pointed to the big willow tree and made a hand signal telling the eagle to fly.

The eagle took the rope and flew in circle several times above the willow tree, then flew back. Huang Rong anxiously said, "Ay! I told you to fly around the tree before coming back." But of course the eagle did not understand what she said, so Huang Rong sighed anxiously. They tried again and on the eight try the eagle coincidentally flew around the tree and came back. Jing and Rong two people were delighted; they pulled the rope to tighten it, then firmly tied the other end to the protruding rock on the reef.

“Rong’er, you go first,” Guo Jing said.

“No,” Huang Rong replied, “I am staying with you. Let her go first.”

Ying Gu stared hard at them. Without saying anything using both hands she pulled herself along the rope, coming ashore.

Huang Rong laughed, “This is my way of having fun when I was little. Master Guo, please be generous with your rewards!” With one leap she landed on the tight rope and utilizing her lightness kungfu to the fullest she walked along the rope just like a tight-rope walker; brandishing her bamboo stick, traversing the great waves of the rushing river below, toward the willow tree on the shore.

Guo Jing had not learned the same trick, he was afraid to make a wrong step, so he did not dare to fool around like her. Just like Ying Gu, he used both hands to pull himself hanging on the rope, heading to the shore.

He was still about several ‘zhang’s from the shore when suddenly he heard Huang Rong called out, “Hey, where are you going?” She sounded baffled. Guo Jing was afraid Ying Gu had not come to her senses and did something foolish, so he sped up and before even arrived at the willow tree he jumped down.

Huang Rong pointed to the south and said, “She is leaving.”

Guo Jing focused his eyes and saw Ying Gu was running with all her might over the rocky mountain path. “Her mind is confused, I am afraid she would hurt herself. Let us pursue her,” he said.

“All right!” Huang Rong said; lifting up her legs she was ready to run, but suddenly her legs went weak and she fell

sitting down, shaking her head.

Guo Jing knew that she had used excessive strength after the injury; she was exhausted and did not have enough energy to run. "Just sit here and take a rest, I will pursue her and take her back," he said. Immediately he ran toward the direction Ying Gu was last seen; but after crossing a plain in front of him was a fork on the road going three separate directions. Ying Gu's shadow was nowhere to be seen; he did not know which way she took. Here the rocks were big, the grass reached his chest; everywhere he looked he did not see anybody else. Meanwhile the sun was setting behind the mountain, the sky was turning dark; he was afraid Huang Rong would be worried over him, so he decided to go back.

Two people spent the night among the rocks, hungry and tired. At daybreak they woke up and started to walk along the small pathway by the river banks. They had to find their little red horse before coming back to the main road.

After walking for half a day they found a small inn by the roadside; they bought three chickens, one for them to eat, while with the other two they fed their eagles. The pair of eagles perched on top of a tall tree, eating their cockerels that the feathers fluttered down like snowfall.

They were eating heartily when suddenly the female eagle let out a long cry, dropped the half-eaten cockerel, raised its wing and flew to the north. The male eagle followed its mate with an anxious cry.

"Those two eagles sound very angry, I wonder what they saw?" Guo Jing said.

"Let's take a look," Huang Rong said. Two people ran along the main road. They saw the eagles fly in circles in the distance; suddenly they swooped down and soared up

again. They circled several more times, then swooped down again.

“They are fighting an enemy,” Guo Jing said.

They sped up their steps and after about two, three ‘li’s they saw a row of houses standing very close to each other; it was a small town. The pair of eagles circled above this town, it seemed like they had lost their enemy’s track. Guo Jing and Huang Rong hastened to the outskirts of the town; they tried to call their eagles down, but the eagles ignored them, they kept circling above as if they were still looking for the enemy.

“I wonder with whom do these eagles have big enmity with,” Guo Jing said.

Only some times later the pair of eagles finally did come down one after another. The male eagle’s left foot was dripping with blood from a really deep saber cut; looked like if its muscle and bone were not strong, that foot would be chopped through. The female eagle’s right claw was firmly grabbing a piece of blackish object. They looked closer and found out that it was a piece of human scalp, with a big clump of hair on it. It looked like the scalp was freshly plucked right from a head, with stains of blood still around it.

Huang Rong applied some cut wound medicine on the male eagle’s foot. Guo Jing flipped over the scalp he took from the female eagle and muttered, “This pair of eagles is so tame ever since they were small; they had never harmed anybody unless they are provoked, how could they suddenly fight with someone?”

“Something is amiss here,” Huang Rong said, “If we can find this person who lost the scalp, we’ll understand everything.”



Two people went into town and found an inn to spend the night; then they went out separately to inquire. But that town was rather big, with quite a large number of people around; they investigated until dark, but did not find the slightest clue.

"I've been everywhere to look for a person without a scalp, but could not find anything," Guo Jing said.

Huang Rong smiled, "A person without scalp could always wear a hat to cover his head," she said.

"Ah!" Guo Jing exclaimed, suddenly enlightened. He remembered seeing quite a lot of people wearing hat in town, but of course he could not take their hats off one by one to take a look.

By daybreak the pair of eagles came back with their little red horse. Guo Jing and Huang Rong were worried about Hong Qigong's injury, also the martial art match at the Misty Rain Tavern on the mid-autumn festival was drawing near, besides, the enmity the eagles had with whoever was not that important, so they decided to start their journey to the east immediately.

Two people rode on the speeding little red horse with the pair of eagles followed above them. Along the way Huang Rong kept talking and laughing, playing around, looking a lot more lively than she was; sometimes far into the night she was not willing to take a rest. Guo Jing knew she was exhausted, he often urged her to take a rest, but Huang Rong simply ignored him. Sometimes late at night she sat cross-legged on the bed chit-chatting with him over some trivial matters.

One day from the western Jiangnan road they arrived at the southern road within the Zhejiang border. They had been riding the horse for a whole day. It was not too far from the

Eastern Sea shore. They stopped by an inn to spend the night. Huang Rong borrowed a shopping basket from the innkeeper; she wanted to go to town to buy some meat and vegetables to prepare some dishes.

"You are tired after traveling the whole day," Guo Jing tried to persuade her, "Let us just eat in the restaurant here."

"I want to cook for you," Huang Rong replied, "Don't you like my cooking anymore?"

"Naturally I like your cooking," Guo Jing said, "But I want you to take a lot of rest. Wait till you are well, then you can cook for me. It won't be too late, will it?"

"Wait till I am well; at that time ..." Huang Rong said. Her arm carried the shopping basket, one foot had already stepped outside the room, she paused as if she was startled.

Guo Jing did not understand her thought; he gently pulled the shopping basket from her arm and said, "That's right. Wait till we find Shifu, then we can enjoy the food you prepare together."

Huang Rong stared blankly for half a day. Finally she returned to the bed and soon she looked like she was asleep. The innkeeper came with their food. Guo Jing called her to eat. Huang Rong jumped out of bed at once and said with a laugh, "Jing Gege, we won't eat this food, come with me."

Guo Jing complied and followed her out of the inn, they walked toward downtown. Huang Rong randomly picked a house with white fence wall and black door, a rich family's house. They circled to the back and leaped over the wall, broke into the house. Guo Jing did not know what was going on, but he followed her nonetheless. Straightaway Huang

Rong went to the front hall only to see the hall was bright with candles; the host was having a party.

“Wonderful!” Huang Rong called out in delight, “I picked the right house.” Giggling and walking forward she shouted loud and clear, “Everybody get out of my way!”

There were three banquet tables in the hall; the host and about his thirty guests were startled. They saw her as a beautiful looking young girl; they looked at each other, puzzled. Huang Rong casually seized a fat man, her foot moved to trip that fat man, sending him tumbling to the floor. “You still don’t want to scramble?” she said with a laugh.

The guests scrambled at once in great confusion. The host cried out, “Guards! Where are the guards?”

Amidst the commotion two martial art instructors led about a dozen villagers with sabers and sticks in their hands came rushing in. With a laugh Huang Rong rushed forward and with two moves she flattened the two instructors. She snatched a saber and brandished it, creating a bright white light, pretending she was about to make a kill. The guests screamed in terror; they staggered along and running against each other trying to escape.

As the host saw the unfavorable situation, he tried to slip away; but Huang Rong reached out and pulled his beard, her right hand brandished the saber as if she was going to chop him away. The host was so scared that he dropped to his knees and with a trembling voice said, “Nu ... Nu Da Wang [lit. female big king; ‘Da Wang’ was how the people addressed a robber], Good ... Good Miss; you want gold or silver, I will certainly present everything to you. Please just spare my old life ...”

Huang Rong laughed, "Who wants your money?" she said, "I want you to accompany us to drink." Grabbing his beard with her left hand she pulled him up. The host was in pain but he did not dare to cry out. Huang Rong pulled Guo Jing along to sit at the head table.

"Everybody sit down!" Huang Rong ordered, "Why are you still standing?" Raising the saber in her hand she hacked down and the saber stuck on the table.

The guests were startled and scared, they crowded around the other two tables, nobody dared to sit at the head table.

Huang Rong shouted, "You don't want to accompany me drinking, do you? Whoever don't come over, I'll butcher him first!"

Everybody rushed forward, shoving and elbowing one another, causing seven, eight chairs to tumble over. Huang Rong shouted again, "You are not three years old, are you? Why can't you sit nicely?"

Still shoving and elbowing one another the guests scrambled over and after half a day they finally managed to sit nicely around the three banquet tables.

Huang Rong poured herself a cup of wine and gulped it down in one go. "What kind of party is this?" she asked the host, "Anybody died in your family? How many have died?"

The host stammered, "Actually, a child was born for me in my later years. Today he is one month old, so I invited friends, relatives and close neighbors to celebrate."

Huang Rong laughed, "That's wonderful! Let me take a look at your child," she said.

The host turned pale; he was afraid Huang Rong would harm the child, but seeing the saber stuck on the table he

did not dare to refuse; he ordered the wet nurse to bring the child out.

Huang Rong held the child in her arms; she looked at his small face under the candlelight, and then she looked up to the host. Leaning her head sideways she said, "He doesn't look the least bit like you; are you sure he is your child?"

The host looked awkward; his whole body quivered, he said, "Yes, yes!" It was unclear if he was saying that the child was his, or he was saying, "What Miss said was true." The guests felt funny, but nobody dared to laugh.

Huang Rong took out a gold ingot from her pocket and gave it to the wet nurse; she also handed over the child back to her. "It's a small gift. Just consider it a first meeting gift from his maternal grandmother," she said.

Everybody could see that she is very young, but she called herself a grandmother; they could also see her grand appearance, she looked both heroic and rich; they looked at each other.

The host was overjoyed with this unexpected turn of events, he repeatedly expressed his thanks.

"Come," Huang Rong said, "I'll toast you one bowl!" She took a big bowl and poured wine to the brim, shoving it in front of the host.

The host said, "This old man's drinking capacity is shallow. Miss, please forgive me."

Huang Rong raised her beautiful eyebrows, stretched out her hand to pull his beard. "Are you or are you not going to drink?" she barked.

The host had no choice but to raise his bowl and 'glug, glug' he drank the whole bowl down.

"That's right!" Huang Rong laughed, "Now we are having fun. Come, we'll have drinking stories."

If she wanted to have drinking stories, who at the banquet table dared to refuse? But the guests around the table were not rich merchant or educated people, only peasants and villagers, how could she find a true scholar among them? Everybody was trembling with fear trying to make up some wild stories.

After a while Huang Rong became impatient and shouted loudly, "Everybody stands aside!"

Like they had just received pardon everybody scrambled to stand up. Suddenly 'boom!' the host fell backward on his chair. Turned out he was totally drunk and could not stand up anymore. Huang Rong burst out in laughter. She kept drinking wine and talking with Guo Jing as if there was nobody else around, letting the guests helplessly standing on the side just watching them.

They were eating and drinking until the first watch of the night. Several times Guo Jing tried to persuade her and finally Huang Rong had enough and was willing to leave.

Returning to their inn Huang Rong asked with a laugh, "Jing Gege, are you having fun today?"

Guo Jing replied, "Without reasons you scared people to their deaths; why bother to come in the first place?"

"I am looking for my own well-being and enjoyment," Huang Rong said, "Why would I bother over other people's life and death?"

Guo Jing was startled; he felt her manner of speaking was rather unusual, but momentarily he could not figure out the profound meaning behind those words.

Huang Rong suddenly said, "I want to go out and take a walk. Are you coming?"

"It's the middle of the night," Guo Jing said, "Where do you want to go?"

"I think that child is amusing," Huang Rong said, "Grandmother wants to hold him and play with him for a few days; then I'll give him back to his family."

"How can you do that?" Guo Jing anxiously said.

Huang Rong only smiled and headed out the door, leaping over the wall. Guo Jing hastily overtook her, pulled her arm trying to stop her, "Rong'er, you have played around for along time," he said, "Don't you have enough?"

"Definitely not enough," Huang Rong stood still and replied. She paused for a second then continued, "I want you to keep me company. Only then will I have enough fun. In a few more days you will leave me, you will be with that Princess Huazheng; she definitely won't let you see me again. Our time together is numbered. Each day that passed means one less day I am with you. I want to make one day lasts like two days, like three days, like four days. Still it's not enough for me. Jing Gege, I don't want to sleep at night, I want to play around and talk with you. Do you understand my feelings? Please don't try to stop me."

Guo Jing grabbed her hands tight, he felt deep compassion and love. "Rong'er," he said, "I am so dumb, I have never realized you have this kind of love to me. I ... I ..." Speaking to this point he actually did not know what else to say.

Huang Rong smiled slightly. "Father used to teach me to read many classic poems about anxiety, about hatred, and the like. I only know that he missed my departed mother, that's why he loved to read about those kinds of things.

Today I discovered that happiness and joy only come for a moment, but pain and suffering are the matters of a lifetime."

The crescent moon rose atop the willow tree, the night was as cold as the water, gentle breeze brushed their clothes. Initially Guo Jing was ignorant, even though he knew Huang Rong's deep feelings toward him, he did not realize she loved him this much. As he listened to her speaking, everything that happened all throughout that day became clear to him. He said in his heart, "I am a crude and straightforward man. In the future I won't be with her. Although I will certainly think about her often, miss her, eventually I will get over her. But what about her? She will live alone on the Peach Blossom Island with only her father to keep her company. Won't she be lonely?" He thought further, "Someday her father will die, then only some deaf and mute servants will accompany her. She loves to have new ideas, doing new things. With nobody to accompany her, won't she die of boredom?"

Thinking about these things his body trembled involuntarily. His grip on her hands tightened, his eyes stared hard at her face. "Rong'er," he said, "Even if the sky falls down, I want to be with you on the Peach Blossom Island for as long as I live!"

Huang Rong trembled, she raised her head and said, "You ... what did you say?"

Guo Jing said, "I don't care about Genghis Khan, about Princess Huazheng. All my life I want to be with you."

Huang Rong let out a soft cry and buried her head in his bosom. Guo Jing stretched out his arms and embraced her tightly. This matter had been vexing him for a while. This moment, ignoring everything else he suddenly made up his



mind; his heart felt happy and relieved. Two people hugged each other tightly; they had forgotten everything else around them.

After a while Huang Rong gently asked, "What about your mother?"

"I will fetch her and take her to the Peach Blossom Island," Guo Jing replied.

"Aren't you afraid of your master, Jebek, and your sworn brother Tuolei?" Huang Rong asked again.

"They love me very much, but I can't have a divided heart," Guo Jing answered.

"What about your six masters of Jiangnan? What about Ma Daozhang [Taoist Priest], Qiu Daozhang? What will they say?" Huang Rong asked.

Guo Jing heaved a sigh and said, "They will surely be enraged, but I will slowly talk to them earnestly. Rong'er, you must not leave me, I also won't leave you."

Huang Rong said with a laugh, "I have an idea. We can go hiding on the Peach Blossom Island and do not come out forever. My father arranged the island in such a mysterious way that even if they come to the island, they won't be able to find you and scold you."

Guo Jing thought this idea of hers might not be appropriate; he was about to ask her of a better idea when suddenly they heard footsteps about a dozen 'zhang's away outside the room. Two night-walkers were using their lightness kungfu rushing from the south heading north. One of them said, "The Old Urchin has fallen into Brother Peng's trick; we don't have to be afraid of him. Let us go quickly."

**End of Chapter 32.**



## Chapter 33 - Upcoming Disaster

Translated by Frans Soetomo



*Huang Rong cursed, "Do you want to die?" and pushed lightly on Lingzhi Shangren's shoulder. Without answering that monk tumbled to the*

*ground face up, his hands and his feet did not move, maintaining the cross-legged sitting position; he looked very strange.*

At this moment Guo Jing and Huang Rong were enjoying happiness and contentment in their hearts; they did not want to mind other people's business. But hearing 'The Old Urchin' three characters their hearts were stirred. They both jumped at the same time and pursued those two men. The men's martial art skills looked ordinary; they did not have the slightest idea that they were being followed. Leaving the town they ran for about five, six 'li's more before turning into a valley. They heard continuous shouts and curses coming from behind the mountain.

Guo Jing and Huang Rong picked up their speed and followed into the valley. They saw that a bunch of people were gathered on a part of a field. Two of them had torches in their hands. In the middle of the field Zhou Botong was sitting motionless. It was not clear if he was alive or dead. Facing Zhou Botong there was someone sitting cross-legged, wearing a red kassaya; it was Lingzhi Shangren [lit. upper/above man, a respectful term to address Buddhist monk]. He too, was motionless. On Zhou Botong's left there was a cave. Its entrance was small, so anybody wanted to enter must stoop down. Outside the cave there were five, six people shouting and cursing, but nobody dared to get within a few 'zhang's of the cave, as if they were afraid something might come out of the cave and hurt them.

Guo Jing recalled one of the night walkers say, "The Old Urchin has fallen into Brother Peng's trick;" and now he saw Zhou Botong was sitting motionless just like a corpse. He was afraid that Zhou Botong was injured; he was very anxious and was about to jump forward when Huang Rong

pulled his arm and whispered, "Before we do anything, let's investigate what happened first."

Two people hid behind a mountain rock and looked at the people outside the cave. It turned out they were all old acquaintances: Shen Xian Lao Guai [Ginseng Immortal Old Freak] Liang Ziwen, Gui Men Long Wang [Dragon King of Guimen (lit. ghost gate)] Sha Tongtian, Qian Shou Ren Tu [Thousand Hands Butcher] Peng Lianhu, San Tou Jiao [Three Headed Scaly Dragon] Hou Tonghai, plus the two night-walkers they followed earlier. The light from the torches illuminated their faces and Jing and Rong recognized those two as Liang Ziwen's disciples; Guo Jing had fought them the first time he learned the Eighteen Dragon Subduing Palms.

Huang Rong thought that now these people were not Guo Jing's and her matches; she looked to all directions but did not see anybody else. With a low voice she said, "With the Old Urchin's skill, how could these several fellows defeat him? It seems like the Western Poison Ouyang Feng is lurking somewhere."

She was about to think of a way to investigate further when Peng Lianhu shouted loud and clear, "Thief male servant bird! [I know this one sounds weird, but it is the literal translation. I'll leave it to the editors to find a more suitable curse words ... ] If you don't come out, Old Man here will smoke you out!"

From the cave came a stern voice, "Whatever stinky tricks you have; bring it on!"

Guo Jing recognized it was his Da Shifu [First Master] Ke Zhen'e's voice; he did not care if Ouyang Feng was lurking around somewhere. "Shifu!" he shouted, "Your disciple Guo Jing is here!" His hands had already made some moves

while he was still shouting. He grabbed Hou Tonghai's back and flung him aside.

The people outside the cave were thrown into confusion. Sha Tongtian and Peng Lianhu made a simultaneous attack. Liang Ziweng turned around Guo Jing's back, ready to make a sneak attack. Ke Zhen'Einside the cave heard everything; he raised his hand and launched a 'du ling' [poisonous water caltrop] toward Liang Ziweng's back.

The projectile carried a fierce gust of wind. Liang Ziweng hastily lowered his head; the 'du ling' flew over his head, cutting several strands of his hair. He was so shocked that cold sweats trickled down his back. He knew Ke Zhen'e's secret projectiles contained a violent poison on it; the other day Peng Lianhu nearly got killed under this weapon. Hastily he leaped back several 'zhang's, stretched out his hand to feel the top of his head. Luckily his scalp was not injured. Straightaway he took some 'tou gu ding' [Bone Penetrating Nails] from his pocket and walked quietly toward the left of the cave; he wanted to enter the cave to extract his revenge.

He was just about to raise his hand when suddenly his wrist was numb; something hit his hand. With a clanking noise the 'tou gu ding' fell to the ground. And then he heard a female voice said with a laugh, "Kneel down! Or you'll eat my stick!"

Liang Ziweng quickly turned his head and saw Huang Rong stood smiling, with a bamboo stick in her hand. He was scared and angry at the same time; his left palm struck toward her shoulder, his right hand tried to grab the bamboo stick. Huang Rong stepped aside to evade his left palm, but did not move the bamboo stick, she let him to have a good grip on it. Liang Ziweng was delighted, he held out his hand, thinking that if this young girl did not let go,

he would snatch the stick away. As soon as he pulled, he did indeed manage to pull the bamboo stick away, but unexpectedly the end of the stick shook and slid right out of his palm. By this time the end of the bamboo stick had entered his circle of defense. His hands were so close to the stick that he hurriedly reached back to grab; but he was too late. A dark green shadow flashed and 'slap!' his head was squarely hit by the bamboo stick.

Overall his martial art skill was not weak; in this critical moment he was still able to throw himself to the ground and he rolled away more than a 'zhang' away before he sprang back up. He looked with a shocked expression at this young girl with bright eyes and ivory teeth. The top of his head was hurting, his mind was confused, and his face looked awkward.

Huang Rong said with a laugh, "Do you know the name of this stick method? You have been beaten by me, so what did you turn into?"

Liang Ziwen had suffered hardship under this Dog Beating Stick Technique in the past; he was beaten half dead and half alive under Hong Qigong's hands. It had been several years since then, but he still had a lingering fear in his heart. He noticed that the stick was indeed Hong Qigong's Dog Beating Stick, and the stick method was indeed Hong Qigong's Dog Beating Stick Technique, used up against him. It looked like this young girl was truly Hong Qigong's heir. With the corner of his eyes he saw Sha and Peng two people continuously step back under the power of Guo Jing's palms without being able to counterattack; he called out, "In honor of the Old Hong Bangzhu [Clan Leader Hong] we'd better go!" He called out his two disciples and turned around to flee.

Guo Jing's left elbow circled around forcing Sha Tongtian to retreat three steps; followed by the sweep of his left hand. Peng Lianhu saw that this palm carried a strong gust of wind, he did not dare to take it head-on, he hastily stepped aside to evade. Guo Jing's right hand made a hook, grabbed his back and lifted him up.

Peng Lianhu was rather short, being lifted high in the air his legs were kicking around frantically. He tried to hit and kick to free himself, but he did not have any strength left. He saw Guo Jing's left hand make a fist, ready to strike his chest like a hammer pounding a nail; how could he endure this strike? He hastily shouted, "What date is today?"

"What?" Guo Jing was startled.

"Are you going to keep a good faith? Do you stay true to your own promise?" Peng Lianhu asked.

"What?" Guo Jing asked again; his right hand was still holding Peng Lianhu high in the air.

"We have agreed to have a martial art contest in Jiaxing on the fifteenth of the eighth month, at the Misty Rain Tavern," Peng Lianhu said, "We are not in Jiaxing, and today is not the Mid-autumn Festival. How can you injure me?"

Guo Jing thought he was right; he was about to release him when suddenly he remembered something. "What did you do to my Zhou Dage [big brother Zhou]?"

Peng Lianhu replied, "The Old Urchin is betting against that Tibetan monk; whoever moves first lose. What does it have to do with me?"

Guo Jing cast a glance toward the two people sitting on the ground, he felt relieved. "So that's how it is," he thought. Then he shouted, "Da Shifu [first master], are you Senior



well?" Ke Zhen'Eonly uttered an 'Hm' sound from inside the cave.

Guo Jing was afraid as soon as he let Peng Lianhu go, he would kick him on the chest; hence with his right hand he flung Peng Lianhu several feet away, while calling out, "Off you go!"

Peng Lianhu took that opportunity to somersault and land on the ground. He saw Sha Tongtian and Liang Ziwen had already run away. He inwardly scolded them for not remembering their friend. He cupped his fists toward Guo Jing and said, "Seven days later at Misty Rain Tavern we will decide victory and defeat." He turned around and displaying his 'qing gong' [lightness kungfu] he ran away. He was wondering about one thing, "Each time I meet this kid, his martial art is improving by leaps and bounds. Isn't that strange? Did he eat some magic pills or find some immortal secret?"

Huang Rong went toward Zhou Botong and Lingzhi Shangren; she noticed that both of them were staring at each other without blinking their eyes. Looking at the situation she recalled the conversation between those two night-walkers and knew that this must be Peng Lianhu's evil scheme. They must be scared of the Old Urchin's martial art, so they tricked him into making a bet against this Tibetan monk to stay still. Lingzhi Shangren's martial art was nowhere near the Old Urchin's; but by keeping him from moving, others would have the opportunity to deal with Ke Zhen'e.

The Old Urchin would be happy to have someone accompany him to play; he would not care about other matters, so it would be useless to speak reason with him. Although there was an earth-shattering fight going on next to him, he would sit still like Taishan [Mount Tai]; he would

not even move his little finger, he was determined to win his bet against Lingzhi Shangren.

“Old Urchin! I’m here!” Huang Rong called out.

Zhou Botong heard her, but he was afraid to lose, so he did not respond.

Huang Rong said, “The way you bet, even if you sit for several more hours you won’t know who wins and who loses; what kind of fun is that? You know what, let me do this: I will tickle both of you on your ‘xiao yao xue’ [laugh waist acupoint] with my both hands; I will make both hands have the same strength. Whoever laughs first will lose.”

Zhou Botong had been sitting impatiently; hearing Huang Rong’s words he agreed wholeheartedly, but he did not dare to show his approval. Huang Rong did not say anything more, she went in between the two and sat down. She put her Dog Beating Stick on the ground and stretched both arms, two index fingers hit both men’s ‘xiao yao xue’. She knew Zhou Botong’s internal energy far surpassed the Tibetan monk’s, so she was not being unfair; she exerted equal strength. But to her surprise while Zhou Botong admittedly did not move, Lingzhi Shangren also seemed like he did not feel anything.

Huang Rong secretly admired him; she thought, “This monk’s skill in closing up his acupoints is really good. If I were hit like this, I would have rolled around in laughter.” Then she exerted more strength to her hands.

Zhou Botong used his internal energy trying hard to resist the strength of Huang Rong’s finger; but this ‘xiao yao xue’ was located very close to the ribs, the muscle was very tender, it was very difficult to send the energy to that spot. If he straightened up his back he could borrow the momentum from the movement to unload the strength; but

that would cause him to move and lose the bet. He felt Huang Rong's finger getting stronger and stronger, he had no choice but desperately resist her finger.

A moment later he could not take it any longer, the muscle under his ribs contract and expand to repel Huang Rong's finger. He leaped up and laughed out loud, saying, "Fat Monk, you are good! The Old Urchin admits defeat!"

Seeing him admit defeat, Huang Rong was regretful, "If I knew this would happen, I would have add a little more strength to the fat monk's body," she thought; and then she stood up and said toward Lingzhi Shangren, "You won. Your grand-aunt does not want your life. Just go! Go!"

Interestingly Lingzhi Shangren seemed not to hear her; he was still sitting motionless. Huang Rong put out a hand and pushed his shoulder, while shouted loudly, "Who wants to see your stupid face here? Do you want to die?" She only pushed lightly, but to her surprise Lingzhi Shangren fell down to the ground, still in the cross-legged sitting position, just like a wooden carving of Buddha.

Zhou Botong, Jing and Rong were stunned. Huang Rong thought, "Could it be that his closing up acupoints skill is not perfected yet and he died while doing it?" She held out her hand to feel his breathing and found that Lingzhi Shangren was still breathing. Immediately she understood what was going on; she was angry but amused at the same time. To Zhou Botong she said, "Old Urchin, you fell into others' trick without knowing it. You are really dumb!"

Zhou Botong opened his eyes wide. "What?" he was angry.

Huang Rong said with a smile, "You unseal his acupoints first, then we'll talk."

Zhou Botong rolled his eyes then he stooped down and traced Lingzhi Shangren's body. He tapped several places and found out that eight of Lingzhi Shangren's major acupoints were sealed by someone else. He jumped up in anger and shouted, "That did not count! That did not count!"

"What did not count?" Huang Rong asked.

Zhou Botong replied, "His friends sealed up his acupoints after he was seated, of course this fat monk could not move. Even if we sit for three more days and nights he won't lose." Turning toward Lingzhi Shangren lying on the ground, he called out, "Come, we'll compete again."

Seeing Zhou Botong was exuberant, he was not by any means injured, Guo Jing was worried about his Shifu. He no longer listened to Zhou Botong talking nonsense, he sneaked into the cave to see Ke Zhen'E without saying anything.

Zhou Botong stooped down to unseal Lingzhi Shangren's acupoints while talking nonstop, "Come, we'll compete again, we'll compete again!"

Huang Rong coldly said, "What about my Shifu? Where did you throw him?"

Zhou Botong was taken aback. "Aiyo!" he cried and turned around, rushing toward the cave. He moved so abruptly that he almost collided with Guo Jing at the cave entrance. Guo Jing was holding Ke Zhen'E's hand, leading him out of the cave. He saw his Shifu was wearing plain white cloth and white headband; Guo Jing was startled, "Shifu!" he asked, "Have any of your family members died? Where are Er Shifu [Second Master] and the others?"

Ke Zhen'E raised his head to the sky without saying anything, two lines of tears flowed down on his cheeks. Guo Jing was shocked, but did not dare to ask. Then he saw Zhou Botong was helping someone else going out of the cave. That person's left hand was holding a wine gourd, his right hand holding half a chicken, his mouth busily nibble on the chicken leg, a broad smile on his face, and he kept nodding his head. He was none other than the Nine-fingered Divine Beggar Hong Qigong.

Jing and Rong two people were overjoyed, "Shifu!" they called out together.

Ke Zhen'E's face suddenly appeared very angry; he lifted up the iron staff and fiercely hit the back of Huang Rong's head. The staff movement was swift and fierce, it was a lethal strike from the 'fu mo zhang fa' [demon subduing staff technique], which he had painstakingly trained to perfection in the Mongolian desert, with the intention to use it against the blinded Mei Chaofeng. It was created so that even though Mei Chaofeng could hear the staff's wind, she would not be able to evade it.

Huang Rong had just seen Hong Qigong after a long time and was squealing with delight; she had never guarded against any sneak attack from her back. By the time she was feeling the wind, the blast of the iron staff had already enveloped her completely. Guo Jing saw the staff was about to shatter her skull, in his desperation his left hand swept horizontally shoving the staff aside; while his right hand stretched out and grabbed the head of the staff. In panic he had used too much power, without realizing that by this time his strength had increased tremendously. The move of his left palm was from the Eighteen Dragon Subduing Palms.

Ke Zhen'E felt a sudden surge of strong energy. He was unable to block and the iron staff fell down from his hand, he himself also tumbling down to the ground. Guo Jing was startled; hastily he stooped down to pick him up. "Da Shifu! [First Master]" he called out. Guo Jing saw Ke Zhen'e's nose was swollen and two of his teeth were broken.

Ke Zhen'E spat the teeth, along with some blood, into his palm. "For you!" he said in a cold voice.

Guo Jing was dumbstruck. He knelt down and said, "Disciple deserves to die. Shifu, please punish me severely."

Ke Zhen'E was still holding out his hand, saying, "For you!"

Guo Jing wept. "Da Shifu ..." He choked, not knowing what to say or do.

Zhou Botong laughed and said, "I've seen master beating his disciple, but I've never seen disciple beating his master until today. Amusing! Truly amusing!"

Hearing this Ke Zhen'E was more furious. "Fine," he said, "There is a saying: swallow the knocked down tooth and the blood. Shall I do it for you?" Holding out his hand he tossed the teeth into his mouth, throwing his head backward he swallowed the teeth into his belly. Zhou Botong clapped his hands, burst out in laughter and cheered loudly.

Huang Rong noticed the situation was unusual. The grievous expression on Ke Zhen'E's face had not disappeared. It was unclear why he wanted to kill her; her heart was full of questions. Slowly she went to Hong Qigong and pulled his hand.

Guo Jing knocked his head to the ground and said, "Even if I have to die ten thousands times, disciple will never dare to

offend Da Shifu. I was out of my mind to let my hand slip and struck Da Shifu."

Ke Zhen'E said, "Shifu this and Shifu that, who is your Shifu? You have the Master of the Peach Blossom Island as your father-in-law, why would you need a Shifu? The Seven Freaks of Jiangnan do not have the ability, how can we be worthy to be Guo Daye's [big master Guo] Shifu?"

Guo Jing heard his words were getting sharper and sharper; he kept knocking his head to the ground.

Finally Hong Qigong could not bear it much longer; he interrupted by saying, "Ke Daxia [Great Hero Ke], Master and disciple spar with each other, somebody losing control is a common occurrence. The stance Jing'er used just now was taught by me. Just blame it on the Old Beggar. Please accept my apology." And he did indeed cup his fists in respect.

Listening to Hong Qigong, Zhou Botong thought, "Why don't I say something too?" Thereupon he said, "Ke Daxia, Master and disciple spar with each other, somebody losing control is a common occurrence. The technique Brother Guo Jing used to grab your iron staff just now was taught by me. Just blame it on the Old Urchin. Please accept my apology." And he also cupped his fists in respect.

He was just talking nonsense and meant it as a joke, but Ke Zhen'E was livid. He believed Zhou Botong intentionally insulted him, and as a result he also regarded Hong Qigong's good intention as a bad one. With a loud voice he said, "You, Eastern Heretic, Western Poison, Southern Emperor and Northern Beggar, always think that your martial art skills are matchless and you can turn this world upside-down? Humph! I say many of your deeds are not righteous, certainly nothing good comes out of you."

With a surprised voice Zhou Botong asked, "Hey, what did the Southern Emperor do to you that you include him in your curse?"

Huang Rong was listening quietly on the side; she knew the more they talked, the worse the situation had become. The Old Urchin being there would only make it more difficult to make Ke Zhen'E's fury subsided. She opened her mouth and said, "Old Urchin, 'the weaving of mandarin ducks desiring to fly together right away' is looking for you; aren't you going to see her?"

Zhou Botong was startled; he jumped three feet into the air and shouted, "What?!?"

Huang Rong said, "She wants to 'stand face to face taking a bath wearing red clothes when the green spring grass ripples in the deepest of dawn's cold' with you."

Zhou Botong was even more shocked. "Where? Where?" he shouted.

Huang Rong pointed to the south and said, "Over there! Go see her, quick!"

Zhou Botong said, "I won't see her. Good Miss, I will do whatever you tell me to do; just don't ever tell her that you have seen me ..." Before he even finished talking, his feet moved and he ran to the north.

"I'll hold on to your promise!" Huang Rong called out.

From a distant came Zhou Botong's reply, "Once the Old Urchin make a promise, I won't regret it." As the words 'regret it' came out of his mouth, like a flash of lightning his shadow had already disappeared.

Huang Rong's original intention was for him to see Ying Gu. Who would have thought that Zhou Botong avoided Ying Gu



like a serpent or a scorpion and ran away from her in fear. It totally blew her mind away; nevertheless she succeeded in getting rid of him.

Up to this time Guo Jing was still kneeling in front of Ke Zhen'E. With tears in his eyes, he said, "For disciple's sake Seven Shifus had traveled to a faraway desert. Even if disciple's body is ground to dust and my bones are shattered, it will still be difficult for me to repay Seven Shifus' kindness. This palm of mine had offended Da Shifu, disciple does not want it anymore!" Drawing the dagger from his waist Guo Jing chopped it down on his left wrist.

Ke Zhen'E swung his iron staff horizontally, striking the dagger to the side. Although the dagger was light and the iron staff heavy, when the two weapons collided sparks flew up; Ke Zhen'E felt a tingling sensation on his palms. He knew Guo Jing was using his entire strength, thus showing his sincerity.

"Fine," he said, "If that's the case, then you must do what I say."

Guo Jing was very happy. "Whatever Da Shifu says, disciple will not dare to disobey," he said.

"If you don't do what I say, I forbid you to see my face in the future and thus our master-disciple relationship is severed," Ke Zhen'E said.

Guo Jing said, "Disciple will do my best. If I can't do it, I'd rather die."

Ke Zhen'E struck his iron staff heavily on the ground and shouted, "Go and cut the Old Heretic Huang's and his daughter's heads; then you can come back to see me."

To say Guo Jing was shocked was an understatement. "Da ... Shi ... Shifu ..." he stammered with a trembling voice.

"What?" Ke Zhen'E asked.

"I wonder how did Huang Daozhu [Island Master Huang] offend you?" Guo Jing asked.

Ke Zhen'E heaved two heavy sighs. Suddenly he gritted his teeth and said, "I really wish the Heaven would restore my sight if only for a moment so I can see your face; you, an ungrateful little animal!" Lifting his iron staff high he hacked it down toward the top of Guo Jing's head.

As Ke Zhen'E asked Guo Jing to do something for him, Huang Rong had already had a vague guess. When Ke Zhen'E's iron staff suddenly struck and Guo Jing did not evade, she thought whatever happened, saving Guo Jing's life was more important; hence from the side her bamboo stick intercepted the iron staff before it reached Guo Jing's head with the 'e gou lan lu' [cutting off a vicious dog's path] stance. As it hit the iron staff, the bamboo stick shook and coiled around the staff, pushing it slanting sideways. This Dog Beating Stick Technique was truly marvelous; although her strength was inferior, by borrowing the staff's strength she managed to re-orient its path.

Ke Zhen'E staggered; without waiting for his feet to come to a complete stop he fiercely beat his own chest twice and then ran away to the north. Guo Jing ran after him while calling out, "Da Shifu, wait!"

Ke Zhen'E halted his steps and turned around; with a stern voice he said, "Guo Daye wants to take my old life?" His expression looked mean and ferocious. Guo Jing was taken aback; he did not dare to continue. Hanging his head down he heard the sound of the iron staff against the ground getting farther and farther away, before completely faded

away. Remembering his Shifu's kindness he could not help but go down on his knees and wept bitterly.

Taking Huang Rong's hand Hong Qigong walked to his side. He said, "Ke Daxia and the Old Heretic Huang both have a very strange temperament; they are always in some kind of disagreement with each other. Don't worry, leave it to the Old Beggar to be the mediator between them."

Guo Jing wiped his tears and stood up. "Shifu," he said, "Do you know ... do you know what it was about?"

Hong Qigong shook his head. "The Old Urchin fell into their trick and was betting against them in staying still. Those traitors wanted to harm me. Luckily we met your Da Shifu outside the Ox Village by accident, and he protected me by taking me hiding in this cave. Thanks to the fierceness of his 'du ling' secret projectiles those traitors did not dare to rush in, so we could hold our ground this long. Ay, your Da Shifu has a noble heart, he was very brave in battle defending justice. He accompanied me in that cave resisting the enemy. Undoubtedly he was determined to fight to the death."

Speaking to this point he took two mouthfuls of wine, and then took a bite on the chicken leg. Biting and chewing the chicken went into his belly; and then he wiped his greasy mouth with his sleeve. Only then did he continued speaking, "The battle was fierce; my martial art skill is gone. I could not offer any help in fighting the enemy. I only saw your Da Shifu's face, but did not have the luxury of talking to him about anything. Judging from how he was very angry, I don't think it was because of your slip of hand. He is a chivalrous hero, how can he have such a narrow mind? Luckily in just a few more days it will be the Mid-autumn Festival of the eight month. Wait till the martial art contest at the Misty Rain Tavern is over, the Old Beggar will speak

on your behalf.” Swallowing his tears Guo Jing uttered his gratitude.

Hong Qigong laughed and said, “Your two babies’ martial art skills have advanced tremendously. Ke Daxia can be considered a prominent character in the Wulin world, yet as soon as you two babies made your moves he fell into awkward positions. What is the story behind it?”

In his heart Guo Jing was ashamed; he did not know what to say. Laughing and giggling Huang Rong told Hong Qigong everything they went through after they were separated.

Hong Qigong cheered loudly when he heard that Yang Kang killed Ouyang Ke; he shot curse words when he heard the Beggar Clan’s Elders were swindled by Yang Kang, “Little Bastard! Four old muddle-headed! Lu Youjiao has feet does not have brain!” He was entranced when he listened to how Yideng Dashi [Reverend Yideng – great master Yideng] saved Huang Rong’s life; and how Ying Gu came at midnight to seek vengeance. Finally his expression slightly changed when he heard Ying Gu suddenly went insane at the ‘qing long tan’ [green dragon shore]. “Ah!” he exclaimed.

“Shifu, what is it?” Huang Rong asked, “Do you also know Ying Gu?” While in her heart she mused, “All his life Shifu has never had a wife. Could it be that he was also mesmerized by Ying Gu? Hmm, what’s so good about this Ying Gu anyway? Mystifying, acting like a mad woman, but can captivate the attention of so many experts of the Wulin world?” Luckily Hong Qigong’s answer was pleasing to her ears.

“Nothing,” Hong Qigong said, “I don’t know Ying Gu, but when Emperor Duan left home [meaning: become a monk], I was there by his side. That day he sent a letter to the

north, inviting me to go to the south. I knew he wouldn't send for the Old Beggar if he did not have a very important matter. I also remembered Yunnan's ham, the 'over the bridge' rice-flour noodle, and the chunk of cakes and delicacies; so I left at once. When I saw him, his face was haggard, like he was suffering from a serious illness; it was completely different from when I saw him during the Sword Meet of Mount Hua, where he looked alive with a dragon or a tiger's appearance. I felt very strange. After I have been there for a few days with the pretense of discussing martial art he wanted to teach me the 'xian tian gong' [inborn/innate strength/energy] and 'yi yang zhi' [solitary yang finger]. The Old Beggar thought: in the past his Solitary Yang Finger was in a level ground with my Eighteen Dragon Subduing Palms, the Old Poison's Toad Stance, the Old Heretic Huang's 'pi kong zhang' [splitting the air palm] and Divine Flicking Finger; nowadays he had mastered Wang Chongyang's 'xian tian gong'. In the second Sword Meet of Mount Hua the title of Number One Martial Artist in the World would certainly belong to him; why would he want to pass on these two special skills to the Old Beggar, without any reason whatsoever? If he wanted to exchange knowledge, why wasn't he willing to learn my Eighteen Dragon Subduing Palms? There must be something behind this.

Later on the Old Beggar mulled over this matter, I talked to him and his four main disciples; finally I found a clue. It turned out that after he passed on these two skills to me he was going to commit suicide. Only why he was grieving so much, even his own disciples were unclear."

Huang Rong said, "Shifu, Emperor Duan was afraid that after he died nobody will be able to control Ouyang Feng anymore."

“That’s right,” Hong Qigong said, “When I found out, I was adamant of not willing to learn anything from him. At last he told me the truth; he said that although his four disciples were loyal and diligent, their minds have been occupied by the kingdom’s affairs for a long time, that they could not concentrate on training martial art, hence it would be difficult for them to achieve success. It seemed like the Quanzhen Seven Masters’ martial art also could not reach the pinnacle of perfection. He said it was fine for me not willing to learn the Solitary Yang Finger, but if the ‘xian tian gong’ is lost, he would not have any face to meet Wang Chongyang Zhenren [lit. true/real person, a respectful term to address a Taoist priest] in the underworld. I asked him to reconsider his decision, but my persuasion was useless. Only, I was unyielding in my stand not to learn from him, with the hope of saving his life. Emperor Duan could not change my mind; finally he relented by abdicating his throne and becoming a monk. I was by his side the day they shaved his head. It has been more than ten years ago. Ay, finally this enmity can be resolved, this is very good.”

“Shifu,” Huang Rong said, “We have finished telling our story, what about you?”

“About me?” Hong Qigong asked, “Hmm, at the imperial kitchen I ate four dishes of ‘yuan yang wu zhen kuai’ [minced five-treasure mandarin duck]; it was enough to satiate my craving; and then I ate litchi fruit and kidney, quail soup, sheep tongue in thick sauce, snail in ginger and vinegar sauce, oyster fermented in sheep’s tripe ...” on and on he listed the name of the dishes he ate at the imperial kitchen, while constantly swallowing his own saliva and licking his own lips.

“Why is it that later on the Old Urchin could not find you?” Huang Rong interrupted.

Hong Qigong smiled, "The imperial kitchen chefs repeatedly found their prepared dishes vanished into thin air; they thought there was a fox fairy making disturbance in that place, so they burned incense and lighted candles to worship me. Later on they told the chief of the imperial palace guards, who then dispatched eight palace guards to the imperial kitchen to catch the fox. The Old Beggar thought it was a serious situation; and neither the Old Urchin nor his shadow could be seen. I had no choice but slipped away to a remote part to hide for a while. That place was called 'e lu hua tang' [green calyx flower hall] or something, it was full of plum flower trees. From the look of it, it was the winter quarter where that fellow, the Emperor, spends his days enjoying the plum blossoms. Only it was the middle of summer; except several old eunuchs sweeping the ground everyday early in the morning, not even a ghost's shadow came to that place. The Old Beggar was free to roam around. Everywhere in the imperial palace there were things to eat; even a hundred beggars won't die of starvation in that place, thereupon I was able to heal my injury in peace and quiet.

I stayed there for more than ten days. One day in the middle of the night I suddenly heard the Old Urchin's voice pretending to be a ghost; and then the voice turned into dog's howling and cat's meowing. He was turning the palace upside down with the noise. And then I heard some people call out, 'Hong Qigong, Hong laoyezi [old master Hong], Hong Qigong, Hong laoyezi!' I took a peek. Turned out they were Peng Lianhu, Sha Tongtian, Liang Ziweng and the other crafty fellows."

"Ah!" Huang Rong exclaimed in surprise, "Why did they look for you?"

"I thought it was very strange too," Hong Qigong said, "As soon as I saw them I went back into hiding. Who would have

thought that the Old Urchin had already spotted me. He was ecstatic; he dashed forward and hugged me, saying, 'Thank the heaven and thank the earth for letting me find you at last.' Immediately he ordered Liang Ziweng and the others to follow behind us ..."

"How could Liang Ziweng and the others listen to the Old Urchin's order?" Huang Rong wondered.

Hong Qigong laughed and said, "At that time I was also racking my brain but could not figure out the reason. All I can say was that they were very afraid of the Old Urchin. Whatever he said, they did not dare to disobey. He ordered Liang Ziweng and the others to follow behind us, while he carried me to the Ox Village to find you two people. Along the way he told me that he had looked for me everywhere but could not find me, he was very worried. And then quite by accident he bumped into Liang Ziweng and the others by the city wall. In his frustration he beat each and every one of them really bad, and then ordered them to comb all streets and alleys the whole day and the whole night to look for me. He said they had been searching around the imperial palace for a while, but the palace was huge while I was hiding in a remote place. All throughout, they did not see me."

Huang Rong said with a smile, "I did not expect the Old Urchin to be that smart, able to make those devil heads to follow his orders obediently. I wonder why they did not run away."

Hong Qigong smiled and said, "The Old Urchin employed a mischievous trick. He rubbed some dirt from his body and made more than a dozen pills. He forced them to take three pills for each person, said that this poison would react in seven by seven, forty nine days. The poison was so lethal and nobody in the world other than himself would be able



to neutralize it. If they were obedient, he would give them the antidote on the forty-eighth day. Although these wicked thieves half believed and half doubted, they certainly could not take a risk with their own lives; in the end they did not have any choice but to believe and they were compelled to listen to the Old Urchin's yelling and screaming, without daring to defy."

Initially Guo Jing was grieving, but hearing Hong Qigong's story he could not help but smile. Hong Qigong continued, "When we arrived at the Ox Village we could not find you two. The Old Urchin again forced them to go out and search for you. Last night they all came back with their heads hung low. The Old Urchin scolded and cursed them. He was getting angrier and angrier until suddenly he said, 'If by tomorrow you still cannot find those two babies Guo Jing and Huang Rong, I will make urine pulp pills and give them to you!' Of course they began to get suspicious and repeatedly provoked him to talk. The Old Urchin was screaming and kicking, finally they found out that the pills they took earlier were not poison at all. I know the situation would turn dangerous; these traitors would certainly create not a small trouble. I told the Old Urchin to kill them all. Who would have thought that Peng Lianhu also saw the danger, immediately he hatched a deception; he told that fat Tibetan monk to compete against the Old Urchin in sitting still in meditation. I could not stop them, and was forced to run out of the Ox Village. I came across Ke Daxia outside the village. He protected me and we ran to this place. Peng Lianhu and the others chased us. Although the Old Urchin was muddle-headed, he knew better than leaving me alone, so he busily overtook us here. These traitors constantly provoked him, until finally the Old Urchin could not take it anymore and agreed to bet against the monk."

Listening to this story Huang Rong was both angry and amused at the same time, she said, "If we did not meet them by accident, Shifu, your life would be delivered under the Old Urchin's hand."

Hong Qigong said, "My life is almost gone anyway, it doesn't really matter whose hand will deliver it away."

Huang Rong suddenly remembered something. "Shifu," she said, "That day when we came back from Ming Xia Dao [bright red clouds island] ..."

"It's not Ming Xia Dao, it's 'ya gui dao' [crushing ghost island]," Hong Qigong interrupted.

"Fine," Huang Rong smiled slightly, "It's Ya Gui Dao then. Now, that Ouyang Ke is not the least bit a fake ghost, he is a real ghost. That day when we rescued Ouyang Feng uncle and nephew, on the wooden raft the Old Poison said that there was one man in this whole wide world who can heal your injury. Only this person's martial art is matchless; so we can't use force against him, and you are not willing to harm others to benefit yourself by asking him to help you. At that time you were not willing to mention this person's name. Later on Jing Gege and I went to Xiangxi. Naturally now we know that other than Emperor Duan then, or Reverend Yideng now, there is no one else."

Hong Qigong sighed, "If he used Yiyang Zhi [Solitary Yang Finger] to attack my 'qi jing ba mai' [lit. marvelous/mysterious passage 8 pulses, Kwok & Huang Yushi from Wuxiapedia translated it as: Eight Extraordinary Channels], without a doubt he would heal my injury. But this kind of skill will injure his own internal strength for as long as five years or as few as three years, it's hard to say. Let's just say that he does not care about the second Sword Meet of Mount Hua, but he is already over sixty years of age; just

how much longer is he going to live? How can the Old Beggar open his mouth and ask for his help?"

"Shifu," Guo Jing said happily, "This is great! We don't need anybody's help, I can go through your 'qi jing ba mai'."

Hong Qigong was surprised, "What?" he asked.

Huang Rong said, "Jing Gege recited that babbling and mumbling part from the Manual and Reverend Yideng has translated it for us. He told us to tell you, Senior, to use this technique to open your own 'qi jing ba mai'." Straightaway she recited Yideng's translation from memory.

After listening to this Hong Qigong pondered for a long time, and then he jumped in joy and exclaimed, "Wonderful! Wonderful! I believe I will need only about one and a half year to recover."

Huang Rong said, "In the Misty Rain Tavern martial art contest our opponent will surely invite Ouyang Feng to help their side. The Old Urchin's martial art might not be inferior to his, but he is a wild person. I am afraid he won't show up during the competition time. We must go to the Peach Blossom Island to get my father's help to ensure victory."

"What you said is not wrong," Hong Qigong said, "I will go to Jiaying first, the two of you go to the Peach Blossom Island."

Guo Jing was reluctant to leave his shifu, he insisted on escorting Hong Qigong to Jiaying. Hong Qigong said, "I will ride your little red horse. If there is any problem along the way, the Old Beggar will just run away. Who can chase after me?" Immediately he mounted the horse. With a couple of 'glug, glug' he drank his wine, and then pressed the horse's belly with his legs. The little red horse let out a long neigh

toward Guo Jing and Huang Rong, as if it did not want to leave them, and then galloped like the wind to the north.

Guo Jing watched until he could not see Hong Qigong's shadow anymore, he also recalled how Ke Zhen'E wanted to kill Huang Rong, his heart was heavy. Huang Rong did not try to comfort him. She went alone to find a boat for hire then they set sail toward the Peach Blossom Island.

When they arrived on the Island, they immediately sent the boat away. Huang Rong said, "Jing Gege, I am going to ask a favor from you. Will you promise to grant it?"

"What is it?" Guo Jing asked, "I don't want to do something I won't be able to do."

Huang Rong laughed and said, "I am not going to ask you to cut off your six masters' heads."

Guo Jing was upset. "Rong'er," he said, "Can't you not mention this matter anymore?"

"Why can't I mention it?" Huang Rong countered, "You may have already forgotten about it; but I can't. Even though I am good to you, I don't want you to cut down my head."

Guo Jing sighed and said, "I really don't understand why Da Shifu was so angry. He knew you are the love of my life. I'd rather die a thousand times, ten thousand times, than hurting you the least bit."

Huang Rong could hear the sincerity in his voice, her heart was moved. She pulled his hand and leaned against his body. Pointing to a row of willow trees by the creek she said with a tender voice, "Jing Gege, do you think this Peach Blossom Island is beautiful?"

"It truly looks like a fairyland," Guo Jing replied.

Huang Rong sighed, "I want to live here forever, I don't want to be killed by you," she said.

Guo Jing gently stroked her hair and said, "Good Rong'er, how can I kill you?"

Huang Rong said, "What if your six masters, your Mama, your good friend, they all ask you to kill me? Will you do it or not?"

Guo Jing confidently said, "Even though everybody in the world wants to make things difficult for you, I will always protect you."

Huang Rong held his hand tightly and asked, "Will you be willing to leave all these people for me?"

Guo Jing hesitated and did not answer. Huang Rong looked up and gazed at his eyes, with anxious expression on her face, waiting for his answer.

Guo Jing finally said, "Rong'er, I said that I would accompany you on the Peach Blossom Island for the rest of my life. I have made that decision before I opened my mouth."

"Good!" Huang Rong said, "Then from this day on, you are not going to leave this island."

Guo Jing was taken aback, "From this day on?"

"Um, yes," Huang Rong said, "From this day on! I am going to ask Father to go to Misty Rain Tavern and fight for us. Father and I will go to kill Wanyan Honglie to avenge your father. Father and I will go to Mongolia to fetch your Mama. I will even ask Father not to blame your six masters. I am going to take care of every single one of your concerns for you."

Guo Jing saw the expression on her face was a little bit unusual; he said, "Rong'er, what I said to you, you can definitely count on it. Don't you worry; you don't have to do all these things."

Huang Rong sighed, "The matters in this world are difficult to say," she said, "When you agreed to marry that Mongolian Princess, did you ever think that someday you'll regret your own decision? Previously I only knew that whatever I wanted, I got it. But now I know ... Ay! Whatever you wish you have, just pray that the Heaven will not make things difficult for you." Speaking to this point she could not restrain her eyes from turning red. She hung her head low.

Guo Jing was silent; his heart was filled with tumultuous thoughts. He realized how much Huang Rong loved him, and it made him wanting to stay on the Island to be with her forever. But he felt it was inappropriate for him to ignore all his concerns; only why it was inappropriate, he did not know.

Huang Rong softly said, "It's not that I don't believe you or want to force you to live here; it's just that I am really scared." Speaking of this she suddenly threw herself into his arms and sobbed on his shoulder.

Guo Jing was caught by surprise; he was at a loss of what to do. He quickly said, "Rong'er, what are you afraid of?" Huang Rong did not reply, but she started to weep.

Ever since Guo Jing knew her, they had been through many difficult and dangerous, sometimes miserable situations, but he had always seen her smiling and laughing. This time she was back in her home and very soon will see her father; why was she scared all of a sudden? He asked, "Are you afraid your father has met some accident?"

Huang Rong shook her head. Guo Jing asked again, "Are you afraid once I leave this island I won't be coming back?" Again Huang Rong shook her head. Guo Jing successively asked four, five questions but she shook her head again and again.

After a while Huang Rong lifted her head up and said, "Jing Gege, I don't know what I am afraid of. I remember your Da Shifu's expression when he told you to kill me, I just can't shake it off my mind. I always feel there will come a day you are going to listen to him and kill me. That was the reason I asked you not to leave this place. Will you promise me?"

Guo Jing smiled and said, "I was wondering what important matter worries you so much; turns out it is only over this. That day in Beijing didn't my Six Shifus cursed you as little female demon [xiao yao nu, yao - goblin/witch/devil/monster] or something like that? Afterwards I ran away with you, but we don't have any problem until today. My Six Shifus seem strict and mean, but their hearts are kind and loving. Once you get to know each other I am sure they will certainly like you. Er Shifu's [Second Shifu] skill in picking other people's pocket is amazing; you can learn from him. I am sure you'll have a lot of fun. Qi Shifu [Seventh Shifu] is tender and friendly ..."

Huang Rong cut him off, "So you are determined to leave this place?" she asked.

Guo Jing replied, "The two of us will leave together; we'll both go to Mongolia to fetch my Mother, we'll kill Wanyan Honglie together, and then together we will come back to this place. Won't that be great?"

With a startled look on her face Huang Rong said, "If that's the case, I am afraid we won't be coming back together forever, we won't be together for rest of our lives."

“Why?” Guo Jing wondered.

Huang Rong shook her head and said, “I don’t know. But when I saw your Da Shifu’s expression that was what I felt. It seemed like killing me is not enough; his hatred went deep into his bones and marrow.”

As Guo Jing listened to her, he could see that her heart was broken. Although her face still showed that childlike naïveté, her eyebrows and the corner of her eyes clearly showed her feelings towards the upcoming disaster. He recalled that she was always right; if this time he did not listen to what she said and some day a disaster befell her, how would that be good? Thinking about this his heart ached; he was overwhelmed with emotion and blurted out, “All right! I am not going to leave this place, ever!”

Hearing him Huang Rong fixed her gaze to his face for half a day without saying anything; two streams of tears slowly flowed down her cheeks. Guo Jing said in low voice, “Rong’er, what else do you want?”

“What else do I want?” Huang Rong said, “I want nothing else!” She raised her beautiful eyebrows up. “Even if I want something else, the Heaven won’t let me.” Her long sleeve gently rose up, she danced underneath the flower trees. As she turned her head around, the golden band on her hair glittered under the sun. Her clothes fluttered in the breeze. She danced faster and faster; every now and then she held out her hand to shake down the trees and petals of flowers fell down like rain: red flower, white flower, yellow flower, purple flower, they fluttered in the air just like butterflies dancing around her, creating a very beautiful scenery.

She danced for a moment, suddenly leaped up a tree, and then leaped over to another tree, dancing from tree to tree performing the ‘yan shuang fei’ [the fly of a pair of



swallows] and 'luo ying shen jian zhang' [falling (leaves) divine sword palm technique] stances. She looked so happy.

Guo Jing thought, "Mama often told me stories about a fairy mountain on the eastern sea, where many fairies lived. I wonder if there is a fairy mountain more beautiful than the Peach Blossom Island, and if there is a fairy more beautiful than Rong'er?"

**End of Chapter 33.**

## Chapter 34 - Radical Changes on the Island

Translated by Frans Soetomo



*Inside the room the table was flipped over and the stool lay on its side, books, pen and ink were*

*scattered on the floor and half the scrolls of painting and poems on the wall were pulled down. Guo Jing stood motionless; his eyes looked straight without any expression on his face.*

While Huang Rong was dancing in the air, suddenly she let out a soft exclaim, "Ah!" and jumped down the tree. Beckoning to Guo Jing she walked into the forest. Guo Jing was afraid he would get lost, so he followed closely and did not dare to lag more than half a step behind her. Huang Rong walked fast along the winding pathway and then abruptly stopped. Pointing her finger to a yellow pile on the ground she asked, "What is that?"

Guo Jing rushed forward several steps and saw it was a yellow horse lying on the ground. He quickly came closer and stooped down to take a look; he recognized it was his San Shifu [Third Shifu] Han Baoju's yellow horse. He held out his hand to feel the horse's back and found it was already cold; the horse had died many days ago. This horse had followed Han Baoju to the far away desert; Guo Jing had known the horse since he was little. It was like a good friend to him. To suddenly see the horse dead here Guo Jing was grieved. He carefully considered, "This horse was old, but it was a divine steed and not an ordinary horse. It had galloped north and south all these years with nimble footsteps, it did not show any sign of old age; how could it unexpectedly fall dead in here? San Shifu must be very sad."

He looked closer and noticed that the yellow horse did not lie on its side, but curled with its legs under its belly, crumpled together into one heap of meat. Guo Jing's heart turned cold; he remembered how with just a strike of his palm Huang Yaoshi had killed Princess Huazheng's horse

just like this. Quickly he stretched out his left arm trying to lift underneath the horse's neck, and held out his right hand to examine the horse's front legs. He found out that the bones of the legs were broken. He withdrew his hands and retraced the horse's back, only to find that the backbones were also broken. Guo Jing was increasingly alarmed. He took his hand off the horse and jumped in fright because he saw that his palm was full of blood. The blood had turned purplish black, but the blood smell remained. It seemed like the blood was about three, four days old. Quickly he turned the horse's body around to examine it closely, but he did not see a single wound on its entire body. Absentmindedly he sat on the ground and thought, "Could it be San Shifu's blood? Where is he?"

While Guo Jing was examining the horse Huang Rong stood quietly on the side; only then did she say in a low voice, "Don't you worry, let us investigate this matter carefully." Brushing the flower bushes away she looked to the ground and slowly walked forward. Guo Jing also saw the trace of dripping blood on the ground. Without thinking that he might get lost, he slipped through Huang Rong and anxiously rushed ahead to follow the bloodstain.

The trace sometimes disappeared so Guo Jing took the wrong turn several times. Huang Rong was always careful; she would examine the nearby bushes or the thick patch of grass among the rocks to find the trace of blood. Sometimes the bloodstain vanished altogether so she looked for a hoof print or some horse hair.

After following the trace for several 'li's they saw that ahead of them was a row of short flower bushes, with a grave in the middle of the grove. Huang Rong anxiously rushed toward the grave. Guo Jing had seen this grave before when he first came to the Peach Blossom Island, so he knew it was Huang Rong's mother's grave. He saw the tombstone

lying on the ground, so he raised it up to stand. He saw the line of characters on the tombstone, 'tao hua dao nu zhu feng shi mai xiang zhi zhong' [the fragrant burial ground of Mistress surnamed Feng of the Peach Blossom Island].

Huang Rong saw the grave's door was open and vaguely guessed that there were radical changes on the island. She did not enter the tomb right away, but looked carefully around the grave. She saw the green grass toward the left of the grave was trampled really bad, while there were some vestiges made by blade on the door of the grave. She listened attentively for half a day by the doorway and did not hear anything from the inside, finally she stooped down and entered in.

Guo Jing was afraid he might lost her, he immediately followed. Everywhere along the pathway inside the tomb he saw chipped or even shattered stones from the wall, a sign of a very fierce fight. Two people were very alarmed.

Several 'zhang's ahead Huang Rong stooped down to pick something from the floor. The pathway inside the tomb was dim, but they vaguely recognized that it was a half of Quan Jinfa's balance beam. This balance beam was made of wrought iron, it was as thick as a child's arm; but right now they saw the beam was broken by someone. Huang Rong and Guo Jing looked at each other, they did not dare to say anything. They knew in their hearts that there were only a handful of people in this whole wide world capable of breaking this balance beam barehanded; on this Peach Blossom Island, naturally there was nobody else aside from Huang Yaoshi.

Huang Rong held the broken beam with trembling hands. Guo Jing took the beam from Huang Rong's hand and inserted it in his belt. He stooped down trying to find the other half of the beam. He felt like his heart was pulled

down by fifteen buckets of water; filled with tumultuous thoughts. Part of him hoped he would find it, part of him hoped he would not.

Several steps later the pathway was getting darker. Guo Jing groped on the floor and found a round object. Turned out it was the balance weight, which Quan Jinfa usually used as flying hammer to strike the enemy. Guo Jing put it inside his pocket. Suddenly he felt his hand touching something cold, soft and somewhat greasy; it felt like someone's face. He jumped up in fright and bumped his head to the ceiling of the tomb pathway. Without feeling the pain he hastily fetched his fire paper and lit it. He let out a bitter cry, feeling like the sky was turning around him and the earth shook beneath him, he fell backward and fainted.

The fire paper was still in Guo Jing's hand and the fire was still flickering. Under the fire light Huang Rong saw Quan Jinfa with his eyes open, dead on the ground; the other half of the balance beam stuck out from his chest. Everything became clear to Huang Rong now. She calmed herself down, and then gathering up her courage she took the fire paper from Guo Jing's hand. She placed the fire underneath Guo Jing's nostrils. The smoke rose up, Guo Jing sneezed hard twice and regained his consciousness. He stared blankly at Huang Rong before finally standing up, and two people walked to enter to tomb.

They saw the tomb was in chaos; one corner of the sacrificial table was broken, Nan Xiren's shoulder pole was laid slanting on the floor. On the left corner they saw someone lying down; he was wearing a cloth headband on his head, his shoes fallen down. From the look of his back who else but Zhu Cong?

Guo Jing quietly walked near and pulled Zhu Cong's body. Under the fire light he saw that the corner of Zhu Cong's

mouth showed a faint smile, while his body had been cold for a long time. In his condition, the smile appeared to be strange yet sad. With a low voice Guo Jing said, "Er Shifu [Second Shifu], disciple Guo Jing is here!" Gently he picked Zhu Cong's body up. 'Clink, clink, clank, clank' there was a series of light noise, countless pearls and precious stones fell down from Zhu Cong's pocket, scattered on the floor.

Huang Rong picked a handful of jewels to take a closer look, but threw them away immediately. With a long sigh she said, "These are things my Father placed here to accompany my Mother."

Guo Jing fixed his gaze at her, his eyes looked like they are about to spurt out blood, with a low and calm voice he said, "You are saying ... saying that my Er Shifu came here to steal the gems? You dare to say my Er Shifu ..."

Huang Rong did not flinch under his glowering stare at all; she stared back at Guo Jing, only her stare was full of desperation and painful anxiety.

Guo Jing continued, "My Shifu was a warrior and a true hero, how could he steal your father's jewels? He couldn't possibly ... couldn't possibly come over to plunder your Mama's grave." But looking at Huang Rong's expression his tone gradually changed from angry to sad. The fact was, the jewels fell from Zhu Cong's pocket, he also remembered his Er Shifu was known as 'miao shou shu sheng' [Magic Hand Scholar]; he was able to effortlessly pick anything from anybody's pocket. Could it be that he really came over here to steal the jewels from this grave? No, no, his Er Shifu was always honest and frank, he simply could not do such a dirty and despicable act; there must be an explanation to this. Guo Jing was grieved and angry at the same time, the hair on his forehead was wet with sweat, his mind was dark, he

clasped his fists so hard that the joints were making cracking sounds.

Huang Rong softly said, "When I saw your Da Shifu's expression the other day, I had a feeling that it would be difficult for you and I to have something good between us. If you want to kill me, just do it. My Mama is here. I only ask you to bury me by her side. After burying me, quickly leave the island, don't let my father see you."

Guo Jing did not answer; he walked back and forth in big strides, breathing heavily at the same time. Huang Rong's gaze was fixed on the painting of her mother on the wall. Suddenly she saw something of the face of the painting. She came closer and saw two secret projectiles. Carefully she took them down and gave them to Guo Jing; they were the 'du ling' [poisonous water caltrop] Ke Zhen'E used. She pulled the curtain behind the sacrificial table open, revealing her mother's coffin behind it. She walked to the coffin's side, and was unable to restrain exclaiming, "Ah!" She saw Han Baoju and Han Xiaoying, brother and sister have died behind the jade coffin.

It seemed like Han Xiaoying had slashed her own throat, her hand was still holding tight the sword hilt. Half of Han Baoju's body was draped over the coffin, five finger holes were clearly seen on the center of his forehead.

Guo Jing walked past Huang Rong to take Han Baoju's body away, while mumbling, "I personally saw Mei Chaofeng has died; who else but Huang Yaoshi in this world who can use this 'jiu yin bai gu zhua' [Nine Yin White Bone Claw]?" He gently put Han Baoju's body on the floor, then he went back to take Han Xiaoying's body, and brought the body outside. He walked past Huang Rong without looking at her, as if he did not even know she was there.



Huang Rong's heart turned cold; she stared blankly for half a day. Suddenly the tomb was dark; the fire paper had been burned out. She was used to coming over to this tomb, but now there were four dead people inside. She could not help but feel afraid of the darkness and hastily ran out of the tomb. She tripped on something and almost fell over, but she ran ahead. Only after she was out of the tomb did she recall that she must be stumbling over Quan Jinfa's body.

She noticed the tombstone was askew; she put out her hand to straighten it up. She was about to close the grave's door when suddenly something dawned on her, "After killing the Four Freaks of Jiangnan, how come Father did not close the door of the grave? He loves Mama very much. Even though he was in such a hurry, he would not leave this door open wide like this." One thought led to another, her suspicion aroused, "How could Father let the Four Freaks accompany Mama in the grave? It's impossible. Could it be that Father also met a mishap?" Immediately she pushed the tombstone three times to the right and three times to the left to close the door, and then rushed to the house.

Guo Jing left the tomb earlier than she did, but after walking a dozen of steps, turning to the left and circling to the right, he was lost. He saw Huang Rong walking by and immediately followed behind her.

Without saying anything two people walked through the bamboo grove, over the lotus pond, toward the study room where Huang Yaoshi took up his residence. They saw the building was in a mess; the beams were broken and the pillars bent.

"Father! Father!" Huang Rong called out; rushing inside she saw that the table was flipped over and the stool laid on its side, books, pen and ink were scattered on the floor, half of the scrolls of painting and poems on the wall were pulled

down, but where was Huang Yaoshi's shadow? Huang Rong propped herself on the turned over table, her body shook and she was about to fall.

After half a day she managed to calm herself down. She rushed toward the mute servants' quarter, but did not see a single soul. The ashes on the stove had turned cold. If they did not die, all of them had left some time ago. It looked like there was nobody else on this island except Guo Jing and herself.

Slowly she walked back to the study room, only to see Guo Jing inside standing motionless; his eyes looked straight without any expression on his face. With a trembling voice Huang Rong said, "Jing Gege, go ahead and cry. Quickly cry, then we'll talk!" She knew Guo Jing and his six shifus had a parents and child relationship; right now his heart was extremely grieved. His internal energy had been trained to such an excellent level, that if he was unable to vent his great sadness and pain he would suffer a serious internal injury. Who would have thought that Guo Jing did not seem to hear anything; he only stared at her blankly.

Huang Rong wanted to urge him again, but she was overwhelmed with grief as well. She only said, "Jing Gege," and could not say anything else.

Two people stood silently for half a day; Guo Jing mumbled with a low voice, "I must not kill Rong'er, I must not kill Rong'er!"

Huang Rong's heart was bitter, she said, "Your Shifus are dead, just cry your heart out."

Guo Jing thought aloud, "I am not crying, I am not crying."

After this exchange, the room fell into silence one more time. The sound of the distant waves was faintly heard; in

just a short moment a multitude of thoughts swirling inside Huang Rong's mind. All kinds of things she went through on this island, since she was little until she was fifteen years old, one by one flashed through her brain clearly; and then her body shook again.

She heard Guo Jing said as if he was talking to himself, "I must bury my Shifus first. Must I? Must I bury my Shifus first?"

"Right," Huang Rong replied, "We must bury Shifus first." She went out to show the way, back to her mother's grave. Without saying anything Guo Jing followed behind her.

Huang Rong held out her hand to open the grave, suddenly Guo Jing rushed ahead, his right leg flew up, sweeping toward the middle of the tombstone. The tombstone was made from solid and extremely hard granite; even if Guo Jing's kick was ten times stronger all he could do was to push the tombstone slightly askew, and not making the slightest dent on it. His right foot was bleeding, but he did not seem to feel the pain. His pair of palms ferociously struck and pushed the stone. He pulled the half of Quan Jinfa's balance beam and struck the tombstone over and over. Sparks and debris flew everywhere. Suddenly, 'crack!' the beam snapped. With both of his hands Guo Jing furiously cracked the stone open, revealing the steel rod inside it. He grabbed the steel rod, trying to break it; but the grave door had actually opened before the rod was bent.

Guo Jing stared with a dull expression; suddenly he shouted, "Other than Huang Yaoshi, who can open the gate? Who can lure my 'en shi' [benevolent/kind master] to enter this crafty grave? If it is not he then who is? Who is it?" He threw his head back and shouted, then ran into the grave.

Guo Jing's blood on the broken stone flowed down to cover his hand print. Seeing his deep hatred toward her mother's grave Huang Rong was determined, "If he destroys my mother's jade coffin to vent his anger, I am going to die over it first." She was about to enter the grave when Guo Jing walked back out carrying Quan Jinfu's body. He put the body down on the ground, then went back in and respectfully carried Zhu Cong, Han Baoju and Han Xiaoying one by one and laid them down on the ground.

Huang Rong stole a glance toward him and saw the love and admiration on his face; her heart turned icy cold, "He loves his shifus a lot more than he loves me. I must look for my Father, I must look for my Father!"

Guo Jing carried his four shifus' bodies into the forest, several hundreds steps away from the grave, before he finally stooped down to dig a hole. At first he dug using Han Xiaoying's long sword, he dug faster and faster and finally the sword snapped; even the handle was broken. Suddenly a burst of heat bubbled up from his chest and he spat out two mouthfuls of blood. He did not stop; he bent down his waist and used his hands to continue digging; scooping the earth and throwing it aside like crazy.

Huang Rong went to the quarter of the mute servants in charge of planting the tree and took two shovels. She tossed one shovel to Guo Jing and used the other to help digging the hole. Without saying anything Guo Jing snatched the shovel from her hand, broke it into two and tossed it to the ground; while he continued to dig alone with the other shovel. Huang Rong did not cry at all; she simply sat on the ground to watch.

Guo Jing exerted all his strength and he managed to dig two holes, one big and the other small, within the time needed to cook rice. He put Han Xiaoying's body into the

small hole. He knelt down and knocked his head on the ground several times; and then stared blankly at Han Xiaoying's face for half a day before he finally covered it with earth. Next, he picked Zhu Cong's body and was about to put it into the big hole when suddenly his heart was stirred, "How can Huang Yaoshi's filthy jewels accompany my Er Shifu in his grave?" Thereupon he put forth his hand into Zhu Cong's pocket and took the pearls, jade, and gemstones one by one and without looking at them he tossed everything to the ground. At last he reached the bottom of the pocket and took a sheet of paper out. He unfolded the paper and read these words:

*'From Jiangnan, the humble Ke Zhen'E, Zhu Cong, Han Baoju, Nan Xiren, Quan Jinfa and Han Xiaoying are paying a visit to the Senior, Master of the Peach Blossom Island. A short while ago we heard a rumor that disregarding their own lack of ability the Quanzhen Six Masters are about to settle their matter with the Peach Blossom Island. Juniors here realize this matter involves some miscommunication, only we regret that we are not able to act as the mediator between the two parties involved. Senior is an expert of the present age, a peer of the late Wang Chongyang, Wang Zhenren [lit. true/real man, a term of respect to a Taoist priest]; how can Senior let your honor and prestige fall by arguing with younger generations about right and wrong? In the past Lin Xiangru yielded to Lian Po, and it was regarded as a grand occasion in history. A heroic gentleman's heart is as broad as the sea, and would certainly not be bothered by bickering chicken and worms. The day will come when the Quanzhen disciples will humble themselves in front of the Island Master, and the warriors of the world will admire Senior's honorable chivalry; wouldn't that be great?'*

Guo Jing recognized his Er Shifu's handwriting, he held the paper with trembling hands; he said in his heart, "When the Quanzhen Seven Masters were fighting Huang Yaoshi at the Ox Village, Ouyang Feng launched a sneak attack and killed Changzhen Zi [Eternal Truth] Tan Chuduan. At that time Ouyang Feng shifted the blame to Huang Yaoshi. This Old Heretic Huang is a haughty man, he did not bother to argue, so naturally the Quanzhen Sect hates him to the bone. When my six Shifus learned the Quanzhen Sect was coming in full power to seek revenge, they were afraid both sides would suffer injury, so they wrote this letter urging Huang Yaoshi to temporarily avoid confrontation and think of ways to reveal the truth in the future. My Shifus had a kind intention, how could this old thief Huang Yaoshi made his move and brought this calamity upon them?" But then he thought, "Er Shifu had already written this letter, why didn't he deliver it, but kept it in his pocket? Ah, right, the situation must be pressing, the Quanzhen Six Masters were coming quickly, so they did not have enough time to deliver this letter; therefore, my Six Shifus came in a hurry to prevent the battle." Following which he thought, "Old Heretic Huang, oh, Old Heretic Huang, you must think my Six Shifus came to help the Quanzhen Sect; and thus without separating the green from the red or black or white you just attacked with your poisonous hand."

He was busy with his own thought for a while, and then he folded the paper to put it back into his pocket, suddenly he saw several characters were scribbled on the back of the letter. He quickly turned it over and his heart was thumping hard and jumping madly since he saw some crooked writing, "This business has turned for the worse, everybody guard against ..." the last character was only written three strokes; looked like the disaster had already stricken, so it was unfinished.

Guo Jing called out, "This is obviously the character 'east'; Er Shifu warned everybody to guard against the Eastern Heretic; what a pity he did not have enough time." He crushed the paper into a ball; clenching his jaws he said, "Er Shifu, Er Shifu, the Old Heretic Huang has viewed your good intention as an evil one." His grip loosened and the paper ball fell to the ground. Stooping down he picked Zhu Cong's body.

Huang Rong had always kept her eyes on Guo Jing as he was reading the paper; she saw his expression change several times, she knew the letter must be very important. As the paper fell, she slowly walked over and picked it up, she read both sides and said in her heart, "His Six Shifus came to the Peach Blossom Island with a good intention. Too bad this Magic Hand Scholar had a crooked heart; he was accustomed to stealing his entire life, so that when he saw my mother's many rare treasures he could not help but violating my Father's biggest taboo ..."

In her grief and remorse she saw that Guo Jing was laying down Zhu Cong's body. Zhu Cong's left hand was tightly curled into a fist. Guo Jing pried it open and took something out and held it in his hand. Huang Rong looked closer and saw it was a women's shoe carved from a green jade, approximately an inch long. Although it was a toy, it looked just like a real shoe; the carving was fine and exquisite, truly it was an expensive work of art. Only she had never seen this shoe in her mother's grave before; she wondered where Zhu Cong got it from.

Guo Jing turned the shoe over in his hand to take a look; there was a 'zhao' [to recruit] character engraved on the sole, while another character 'bi' [contest/compete] was engraved inside, other than these characters there was nothing unusual about the shoe. Guo Jing hated these treasures very much, 'swish!' he tossed the shoe to the

ground. He stared blankly for a while, then slowly picked Zhu Cong's, Han Baoju's and Quan Jinfa's bodies and put them in the hole. He was about to cover them with earth, but looking at his three shifus' faces he could not bear to do so. He called out, "Er Shifu, San Shifu, Liu Shifu [Sixth Shifu], you ... you died!" His voice was gentle, the same voice he had used when talking to his shifus in the past.

After about half a day he cast a sidelong gaze toward the pile of treasure by the hole; his anger rose. With both of his hands he scooped them up and walked briskly toward Huang Rong's mother's grave. Huang Rong was afraid he was going to violate her mother's jade coffin; she anxiously caught up, stretching out her arms she blocked the entrance of the grave. "What are you doing?" she imposingly asked.

Guo Jing did not answer, his left arm gently shoved her aside; both of his hands threw the treasures inside the grave. A series of long clinking noise was heard as the jewels hit the ground. Huang Rong saw that jade-green shoe fell near her feet; she stooped down to pick it up and said, "This one is not my Mother's." She handed the shoe over to him. Guo Jing only stared at her blankly, ignoring her. Huang Rong put the shoe in her pocket. Guo Jing turned around and returned to the hole; he shoveled the earth and buried his three shifus' bodies.

Guo Jing was busy for half a day. The sky had gradually turned dark. Huang Rong still did not see him cry; she was getting more and more concerned. She thought perhaps if she leaves him alone he would cry; so she went back to the house to fetch some salted fish and ham and cooked some simple dishes. She put everything in a basket and went back to see that Guo Jing was still standing next to his shifus' grave. It took Huang Rong approximately an hour to prepare the dishes, yet not only Guo Jing did not move a



single step; his expression also did not change the slightest bit.

To see Guo Jing standing like a stone statue in the dark Huang Rong was alarmed and scared. "Jing Gege, how are you feeling?" she called out; but Guo Jing did not pay her any attention. Huang Rong called again, "Come here and eat, you have been hungry for a whole day!"

"I'd rather die of starvation than to eat anything on the Peach Blossom Island," Guo Jing said.

Hearing him talking Huang Rong was somewhat relieved; she knew his stubborn temperament. His heart was broken and hurt, once he said he would not eat anything on this island then he would not eat. Thereupon she slowly put the basket down on the ground and sat down.

One standing up the other sitting down, time quietly passed, the crescent moon rose from the sea and slowly reached the top of their heads. The food in the basket had already turned cold, as cold as the hearts of this couple.

In this chilly wind under the cold moon, amidst the faint sound of waves breaking the shore, suddenly from a distance came a cry. The sound was intensely mournful, like a wolf's howl or a tiger's roar, but it also sounded like a human's voice. The sound was transmitted by the wind, so when the wind died, the sound also disappeared. Huang Rong inclined her ears to listen attentively; she vaguely recognized it was the voice of someone struggling in severe pain, only it was not clear whether the voice belonged to a human or a beast. After determining where the voice came from, she moved her feet and rushed toward that voice.

Actually she wanted to take Guo Jing along, but then she changed her mind, "Most likely this is not something good, it will only increase his anxiety." Darkness enveloped her on

every side, she was actually afraid to go alone; fortunately she knew every grass and every tree on the Peach Blossom Island very well, hence although her heart was thumping hard, she gathered all her courage and went forward.

She had only walked for about a dozen of steps when suddenly felt a gust of wind by her side; Guo Jing dashed past her and was running ahead of her. He did not know the way, so very soon he was lost. Huang Rong saw his hands hacking and his feet kicking, trying to destroy the trees and bushes blocking his way, as if he was losing his mind. "Follow me," Huang Rong said.

"Si Shifu [Fourth Shifu], Si Shifu!" Guo Jing called out. He had recognized his Si Shifu, Nan Xiren's voice.

Huang Rong's heart turned cold, she thought, "It will be very strange if his Si Shifu saw me and did not want to take my life." But by now she had already disregarded all consequences; she knew perfectly well a big disaster was looming ahead, but she did not even try to run away from it. She led Guo Jing into the thick forest on the east side of the island. They saw underneath a peach tree a man was rolling around with twisted body.

Guo Jing cried out and rushed ahead to hug him. Nan Xiren's face showed a smile, his mouth produced 'heh, heh' sound. Guo Jing was scared but also happy; suddenly, 'wah!' he broke into crying. He was crying and calling out, "Si Shifu! Si Shifu!"

Nan Xiren did not say anything; he struck Guo Jing with the back of his palm. Guo Jing was taken by surprise; instinctively he ducked to avoid the blow. As his palm did not hit its target Nan Xiren's left fist struck out. This time Guo Jing thought that his shifu was punishing him; he was happy, so he let Nan Xiren's fist to hit him. Who would have

thought that Nan Xiren's fist carried a surprisingly strong force. 'Bang!' Guo Jing was sent rolling down on the ground.

Since he was little Guo Jing had practiced fist technique with Nan Xiren several hundreds or thousands times; he knew perfectly well the strength of Nan Xiren's fists and palms, he was greatly surprised to find Nan Xiren's strength suddenly increased several folds. Guo Jing had just barely stood up when Nan Xiren's fist came again. Guo Jing still did not want to fend off. This fist carried an even stronger force; Guo Jing saw stars dancing in front of his eyes, he almost passed out. Nan Xiren stooped down to pick a big rock up, and fiercely pounded it down on top of Guo Jing's head. If Guo Jing did not evade, this big rock would certainly crack his skull open and turn his brain to mush.

From the sideline Huang Rong saw the critical situation, she quickly flew forward and pushed Nan Xiren's arm with her left hand. Nan Xiren, with the rock still in his hands, fell down to the ground. His mouth made a 'heh, heh' sound and to everybody's surprise he did not crawl back up.

"Why did you push my Si Shifu?" Guo Jing shouted angrily.

Huang Rong's sole purpose was to save Guo Jing, she did not expect Nan Xiren would be this weak; as soon as she pushed, she hastily held out her hands to help him up. Under the moonlight she saw his face was smiling, but this smile resembled the exaggerated smile of an actor on stage; his face looked very frightening. Huang Rong called out in alarm and withdrew her hands immediately, she did not dare to touch his body. All of a sudden Nan Xiren turned over and struck her left shoulder with his fist. Two people shouted in pain simultaneously.

Although her body was protected by the soft hedgehog armor, this fist had given her enough pain and sent her staggered a few steps back. Blood was dripping from Nan Xiren's fist, which was pricked by the thorns on the armor. Amidst the two people's shouts Guo Jing called out, "Si Shifu!"

Nan Xiren looked at Guo Jing as if he had just recognized him; he opened his mouth to speak, but no matter how much the muscle around his mouth twitched, he still could not say anything. His face showed a smile, but his eyes showed extreme despair.

"Si Shifu," Guo Jing said, "Please take a rest. Whatever it is you want to say, you can say it later."

Nan Xiren tried hard to say something, he lifted his neck to look up, but his lips were unable to form the words. After straining for a while his head dropped, looking down to the ground.

"Si Shifu!" Guo Jing repeatedly called out; he rushed forward to lift Nan Xiren up.

From the side Huang Rong could see clearly. "Your Shifu is writing," she said.

Guo Jing looked sideways and saw Nan Xiren's right index finger was slowly writing on the soft earth. Under the moonlight he saw Nan Xiren wrote character by character: "My ... killer ... is ..."

Huang Rong noticed he wrote with great difficulty, her heart was thumping hard; suddenly she remembered something, "He is on the Peach Blossom Island, even an idiot will know that it is my Father who killed him. But he is on the verge of death and is still using his very last strength to write the killer's name, could it be that the murderer is

someone else?" She was watching Nan Xiren's finger with a rapt attention; she noticed that the finger moved slower as if losing its strength, so she kept praying in her heart, "If he is going to write some other name, please, please let him write it down quickly."

Nan Xiren was writing the fifth character [Chinese character, that is], he started from the upper left hand corner and wrote a small 'ten' (十) character, then his finger trembled and stopped moving all together.

Guo Jing was kneeling on the ground, hugging his shifu. He felt Nan Xiren's body shook violently then he stopped breathing. He looked at the small 'ten' character and called out, "Si Shifu, I know you were going to write the Huang (黄) character, you were going to write the Huang character!" He threw himself on Nan Xiren's body and wept bitterly. In this one cry he had vented up the grief and indignation that had been welled up in his heart the whole day. He cried for quite a while, then his body fell on top of Nan Xiren's lifeless body; he had fainted.

Without knowing how much time had passed, he woke up under the bright morning sunlight. He stood up and swept his gaze around. Huang Rong was gone, and Nan Xiren's body was still lying down on the ground with his eyes open. Guo Jing remembered a saying, 'die without closing his eyes'; he was unable to restrain tears from flowing down his cheeks again. Stretching out his hand he gently closed Nan Xiren's eyes. Suddenly he recalled just before he died Nan Xiren's facial expression was very strange; he wonder what kind of injury was so fatal. Thereupon he untied Nan Xiren's clothes to examine his whole body. Strange to say, except for the pricked hand from hitting Huang Rong's soft hedgehog armor last night, from head to toe, Guo Jing could not find a single scar on Nan Xiren's body. Neither his chest nor his back showed any sign of injury by internal

strength strike; the skin was neither black nor burnt, so there was no sign of poisoning either.

Guo Jing picked up Nan Xiren's body and carried it to be buried together with Zhu Cong and the others; but the pathways in the forest were so strange that after about dozens of steps he lost his bearing. He had no choice but turn back and dig a hole underneath a peach tree to bury Nan Xiren.

Guo Jing had not eaten for a whole day; his stomach hurt from hunger. He wanted to find a way to go back to the shore and find a boat to return to the mainland, but the farther he went, the more confused he became. He sat down to take a rest for a while, then he stood up with a renewed vigor and walked again. This time he had an idea, regardless of he found a pathway or not, he would keep his eyes toward the sun in the east.

After walking for a while ahead of him was a dense forest, seemingly impassable. Nothing strange about the forest, it was just that each tree was full of long and thorny rattan cane; it would be truly difficult for him to set his feet on. He made the decision, "I am not coming back today!" and then jumped up to the tree top.

He only walked one step on the tree when 'rip!' the corner of his trouser was tore by a thorn and his calf was bleeding from several cuts. He walked two more steps, and his left leg was entangled in some long canes. He took his dagger out and cut the canes. Lifting his head up he saw far ahead the rattan trees were very dense, seemingly without end. He called out, "Even if my legs are sheared, I have to leave this cursed island!"

He was about to jump ahead when suddenly Huang Rong called out from the ground, "Get down, I'll take you out."

He looked down and saw Huang Rong standing underneath a rattan tree on his left.

Guo Jing did not reply, he jumped down and saw Huang Rong's face was deathly pale, as if her blood was drained completely out. He could not help but startle; he wanted to ask whether her injury recurred, but he forced himself to bite his lips. Huang Rong noticed he wanted to say something, but as soon as his lips started to move he turned his head around. She waited for a moment without seeing any response from Guo Jing; she sighed gently and said, "Let's go!" Two people walked along the winding path heading east.

Huang Rong's injury had not been completely healed, and she had to face this heavy misfortune; she was tossing and turning in her sleep the previous night. She knew she could not blame her Jing Gege, she could not blame her father, and she could not even blame the Six Freaks of Jiangnan. She only resented herself; why would she have to endure the Heaven's punishment like this? Did the Heaven hate people who lead a happy life?

She led Guo Jing toward the beach; knowing in her heart that this time he would never come back, it would be difficult for them to see each other anymore, so she felt that with every step a piece of her heart was also taken away.

Just beyond the rattan trees forest they could see the beach ahead. Huang Rong felt weary, she was unable to restrain her body from shaking; hastily she used the bamboo stick to brace herself, but unexpectedly there was no strength left on her arm, the bamboo stick skewed and she fell down to the ground.

Instinctively Guo Jing outstretched his right hand to hold her, but just as his finger was about to touch her arm, the

injustice his shifu suffered flashed in his mind. His left hand moved and 'slap!' it struck his own right wrist. He was using Zhou Botong's Mutual Hands Combat Technique; as his right hand was stricken, he turned his palm over and leapt backward immediately.

Without receiving any help Huang Rong fell down to the ground. As Guo Jing saw her falling down, remorse, affection, grief, indignation and all kinds of emotions bubbled up inside his heart. Even if his heart was made of stone he could not restrain himself from stooping down and pick her up. He looked at all directions trying to find a comfortable place to lay her down, and it was then did he saw a green cloth flutter in the wind on the rock toward his northeast.

Huang Rong opened her eyes and saw Guo Jing's gaze was fixed on a distant place; she followed his gaze and also saw the green cloth. "Father!" she called out in alarm. Guo Jing let her down, and hand in hand they ran toward the rock. They saw it was a long gown, stuck in the crook of the rock; they also saw a piece of human skin mask lying next to it. Obviously they belonged to Huang Yaoshi.

Huang Rong was really alarmed; she stooped down to pick up the gown and clearly saw a bloody hand print on the lapel of the gown, with the fingers left winding traces. It looked very scary.

Guo Jing remembered, "After killing my San Shifu with the Nine Yin White Bone Claw Huang Yaoshi must have wiped his fingers with this cloth."

Initially he was holding Huang Rong's hand, but now his blood was boiling inside his chest; he shook Huang Rong's hand away, snatched the gown, and with a 'rip!' sound he tore the gown into two parts. He saw the corner of the



gown was torn, looked like it was the green piece of cloth tied on the eagle's foot. The blood print was so clear that under the bright sunlight it looked as if the palm would jump out of the clothes and slap someone on the face; but it provoked Guo Jing's anger even more so that he felt he was going to go insane from grief and indignation. He tucked his own gown into his belt and waded into the water towards a sailboat.

The mute and deaf servants on the boat had long gone, disappeared without a trace. Without looking back to Huang Rong he drew his dagger out and cut the rope, hoisted the anchor and sailed to the sea.

Huang Rong watched the boat sail to the west. At first she was hoping that he would change his mind, turn the rudder and head back to the island to take her traveling together; but then she saw the boat was getting smaller and smaller, while her heart was turning colder and colder. She stared blankly at the sea until the boat disappeared on the horizon. Suddenly she remembered that she was alone on the island; Jing Gege had gone, and she did not know whether her father would ever return. How could she pass the rest of her days? Would she just stand on this shore forever? Rong'er, Rong'er, you must not take a short cut and die!

All by himself Guo Jing steered the boat, leaving the Peach Blossom Island, heading west. He had sailed for several dozen 'li's when he suddenly heard the eagles' anxious cry high above his head. The pair of eagles had followed him and perched on the sail arms. Guo Jing thought, "The eagles come after me, Rong'er is alone on the island, she must be very lonely!" Overcome with pity and regret he spontaneously turned the rudder around, wanting to take her to travel together. But after sailing for a short while he remembered, "Da Shifu told me to cut Huang Yaoshi's and

Rong'er's heads before I can come and see him. Da Shifu, Er Shifu and the others came to the Peach Blossom Island and fell under Huang Yaoshi's poisonous hands. Although Da Shifu is blind, he can hear clearly. For some reason he was fortunate to escape and stay alive. He raised his iron staff to kill Rong'er; he wanted me to kill Rong'er, what did Rong'er do? I can't kill Rong'er; Er Shifu and the others were not killed by Rong'er. But how can I be together with her? I must cut Huang Yaoshi's head and take it away to see Da Shifu. If I am not the Old Heretic Huang's match, then I'll let him kill me." Immediately he turned the rudder again, making a circle on the sea surface, heading west once more.

Late on the third day the boat reached the shore. Out of hatred of everything from the Peach Blossom Island he took the anchor and smashed the bottom of the boat before leaping onto the beach. He watched while the sailboat slowly leaned sideways and sunk to the bottom of the ocean. He could not help but feel a loss in his heart. Leaving the shore he walked to the west; he found a peasant home and bought some rice to eat. After finding the right direction he went straight to Jiaxing.

That evening he spent the night by the bank of Qiantang River; he saw the reflection of the bright moon on the river, like a big golden wheel floating on the water. Suddenly he jumped up with a start; he was afraid he missed the martial art contest appointment at the Misty Rain Tavern. Immediately he asked the host where he lodged, and found out that today was the thirteenth of the eighth month. Hastily he crossed the river that very same night; he bought a healthy horse and whipped the horse to gallop quickly, and arrived at Jiaxing by early afternoon of the next day.

Since his childhood he had heard his six shifus recounted their battle with Qiu Chuji; how they had a wine drinking

contest out of the huge copper vat at the Drunken Immortal Tavern [zui xian lou], the exquisiteness of their martial art skills and the heroism surrounding that battle. Six people loved to tell the story good-naturedly. So as soon as he entered the southern gate he asked the location of the Drunken Immortal Tavern.

The Drunken Immortal Tavern was located by the bank of Nan Hu [South Lake]. Guo Jing arrived at the front of the tavern. He looked up and saw this tavern's appearance was exactly like what Han Xiaoying had told him. The tavern had been imprinted in his mind for a dozen of years, today he had seen it for the first time with his own eyes; he noticed the exquisiteness of the carving of the eaves, it was truly a beautiful building. At the front of the tavern stood a big wooden sign with 'tai bai yi feng' [the great (Li) Bai (a famous poet of the Tang Dynasty)'s left behind manner/custom/air] four letters engraved on it; while above the main entrance there was a sign with 'zui xian lou' [Drunken Immortal Tavern], inscribed by Su Dongpo [a famous calligrapher of the Song Dynasty], in golden letters, gleaming under the bright sunlight.

Guo Jing's heart was thumping madly; walking and leaping, he went upstairs. A wine shop attendant welcomed him and said, "Honorable Guest, please use the downstairs room, since the upstairs is already reserved for some other guests."

Guo Jing was about to reply when suddenly someone was calling, "Jing'er, you are here!" Guo Jing looked up and saw a Taoist priest sitting and drinking wine, his long beard reached his chest, his face was ruddy; it was none other than Changchun Zi [Eternal Spring] Qiu Chuji.

Guo Jing rushed forward and bowed to the ground, "Qiu Daozhang [Taoist Priest Qiu]!" he called out. His voice was

somewhat choked.

Qiu Chuji held out his hand to raise him up; he said, "You are a day early, that is very good. I am also a day early. I thought tomorrow we are going to fight Peng Lianhu, Sha Tongtian and the others, so I want to be here early to drink wine and reminisce about the past with your Six Shifus. Have your Six Shifus arrived? I have prepared some tables for them."

Guo Jing saw there were nine tables on this upstairs floor; except for Qiu Chuji's table, which was full with dishes and wine, the other eight tables only had a pair of chopsticks and a wine cup. Qiu Chuji said, "Eighteen years ago I met your Seven Shifus for the very first time in this place; they arranged the tables just like this. This one table of vegetarian dishes was for Jiaomu Da Shi [Reverend Burnt Wood], it's a pity that I can no longer meet him and your Wu Shifu [Fifth Shifu]." He sounded very grieved. Guo Jing turned his head around, did not dare to look at him straight ahead.

Qiu Chuji did not notice anything, he kept talking, "That day we had a contest on drinking from the copper vat, so today I went to 'fa hua si' [magnificent (Buddhist) way temple] and fetched the vat. As soon as your Six Shifus are here we can drink again just like in the old days."

Guo Jing turned his head to look at the big copper vat by the screen. The outside of the vat was blackish green from the copper rust, but the inside had been washed and scrubbed clean, and filled to the brim with high quality wine, the fragrance attacked his nostrils. Guo Jing stared blankly at the copper vat for half a day then he turned his attention to the eight empty tables. He thought, "Other than Da Shifu, nobody would be able to enjoy the banquet again. If only I can see my seven benevolent masters sit

together, drinking wine, talking and laughing, getting drunk for the whole day, I would be very happy even if I have to die immediately.”

He heard Qiu Chuji continue, “At that time we agreed that on the twenty-fourth day of the third month this year, you and Yang Kang will have a martial art contest in here. I respect your Seven Shifus as noble hearted chivalrous warriors; I was hoping you would win and lift up the name of the Seven Freaks of Jiangnan in the world. Besides, I was always wandering everywhere, weeding out the criminals from this world; I did not have enough time to spend on nurturing Yang Kang. It was all right not to teach him a good martial art, but I should have taught him to have loyalty and chivalry. For this I am so ashamed toward your Uncle Yang. Although he now thoroughly repented of his former misdeeds, the evil influence in his life will be difficult to eradicate completely; when I think about this, my heart is filled with utmost regret.”

Guo Jing wanted to recount Yang Kang’s dishonorable behavior, but it was a long story so he did not know where to start. Meanwhile Qiu Chuji continued, “In a person’s life, literary or martial art skill is not everything, the most important things are two characters, loyalty and patriotism. Even if Yang Kang’s martial art skill is better than yours a hundred folds, speaking of character, the martial art contest of the Drunken Immortal Tavern is still won by your shifus. Hey, hey, Qiu Chuji lost with a satisfied heart.” He laughed a big laugh. Suddenly he saw Guo Jing’s tears flow down like rain, he was surprised, “Ah, why are you so sad?”

Guo Jing scrambled over one step, he bowed to the ground and wept, “My ... my ... my five benevolent masters have passed away.”

Qiu Chuji was shocked. “What?!?” he almost shouted.

Still crying Guo Jing said, "Except for my Da Shifu, the other five are ... are dead."

These two sentences struck Qiu Chuji like a loud thunder in bright sunlight; he was silent for half a day. He was hoping he would meet some old friends and have a good time together, who would have thought that suddenly disaster struck. Although his time together with the Seven Freaks of Jiangnan was not much, for the last eighteen years he had already regarded them as his lifelong friends. Now that he heard this shocking news, his heart was filled with grief. He went over to the railings in big strides; he looked out toward the vast lake in front of him, throwing his head backward he let out a long cry. One by one faces of the Seven Freaks flashed in his mind. He turned around and picked up the copper vat, with a loud voice he cried out, "My friends are dead, what use do I have of you?" Sending his strength to his arms he threw the vat away. The copper vat fell into the lake with a loud splash, the water flew everywhere. Turning his head toward Guo Jing he grabbed Guo Jing's arms and asked, "How did they die? Tell me!"

Guo Jing was about to reply when with the corner of his eye he caught sight of someone silently enter the room; he was wearing green clothes, his face was elegant and unrestrained, it was the Master of the Peach Blossom Island, Huang Yaoshi. Guo Jing looked twice, he was afraid of mistaking him for someone else; he fixed his eyes with rapt attention. Who was he but Huang Yaoshi?

Huang Yaoshi also saw him here and was surprised. Suddenly he felt a gust of wind on his face; Guo Jing attacked him over the table using the Proud Dragon Repents. In this one palm Guo Jing had sent out his whole strength, the power was astonishing. Huang Yaoshi slightly moved sideways, his left hand shot out and pushed Guo Jing's palm to the side. A series of cracking noise were

heard, Guo Jing could not hold his ground; he bored through the wooden partition and fell downstairs.

It was a bad day for the Drunken Immortal Tavern, Guo Jing happened to land on the shelf containing cups and bowls. 'Bing! Bang! Bing! Bang!' bowls, plates, trays, wine cups; everything was smashed to hundreds and thousands of pieces.

That afternoon, when the old innkeeper heard Qiu Chuji ordered the tables to be arranged in such a way, also saw him bringing the huge copper vat upstairs, he remembered what happened eighteen years ago; he had already had a queasy feeling about it. Now that the upstairs and downstairs were shattered, he could not help but bitterly cry out. He prayed head over heels, "Please help those in distress, oh Goddess of Mercy, the Jade Emperor of Heaven, the God of the City ..."

Guo Jing was afraid the dishes and bowls fragments would injure his palm, so he did not dare to push himself up. He twisted his waist and leaped up, and rushed back upstairs immediately. He only saw a grey shadow flashed, followed by a green shadow; Qiu Chuji and Huang Yaoshi leaped down the window one after another. Guo Jing thought, "This old thief's martial art is above mine; I can't fight him barehanded." He drew two kinds of weapons from his waist, with his mouth he bit the dagger given by Qiu Chuji, in his right hand he held the golden blade given by Genghis Khan. He thought, "Even if I have to stake it all and endure that old thief's fist or kick, I have to make a couple of holes on his body." He rushed to the window and jumped down.

By now the street was bustling with pedestrians; they heard that some people jumped out from the tavern and came to take a look. Suddenly they saw that someone else was jumping out of the window with a shining blade in his hand;

the crowd cried out in alarm, they pushed and shoved each other and several people tumbled down. Guo Jing could not see Qiu, Huang two people because of the crowd; he quickly took the dagger from his mouth and asked an old man nearby, "Where did the two people that jumped down from the upstairs go?"

That old man was startled, he cried out, "Mr. Hero, please spare my life, it's none of my business."

Guo Jing repeated his question, but that old man was so scared that he kept calling out, "Help! Help!" Guo Jing gently pushed him aside and rushed out from the crowd, but Qiu and Huang two people had disappeared completely.

He rushed back upstairs and looked to all directions, he saw a small boat on the lake carrying Qiu and Huang two people; it looked like they were heading toward the Misty Rain Tavern on the island in the middle of the lake. Huang Yaoshi sat in the cabin, while Qiu Chuji sat on the stern, rowing. When he saw this Guo Jing was startled, he thought, "Those two people will certainly fight to the death at the Misty Rain Tavern. Qiu Daozhang is brave, but how can he be that old thief's match?" Anxiously he rushed back downstairs, grabbed a small boat and paddled furiously to catch up with them.

Seeing his enemy ahead it was very difficulty for him to be calm, but he knew he ought to be patient on the water; 'snap' the handle of oar was broken because he exerted too much energy. He was furious and anxious at the same time; he took a plank from the boat and used it to paddle the boat. Now instead of going faster he was going slower; the distance between his boat and the two people's boat gradually increased. By the time he managed to land the boat with a great deal of trouble, those two had already gone.



Guo Jing thought aloud, "I have to swallow my anger, I can't lose my life before avenging this enmity." He took a deep breath and spat three times; then he cocked his ears in full attention. He heard from behind the tavern faintly came the noise of blades splitting the air, mixed with people calling and responding each other; apparently it was not Qiu and Huang two people. Guo Jing looked around assessing the situation around him, and then tiptoeing into the Misty Rain Tavern. He saw nobody downstairs, so he rushed upstairs only to see by the window someone was leaning against the railings, looking out, his mouth was still noisily chewing something. It was none other than Hong Qigong.

"Shifu!" Guo Jing rushed forward and called out. Hong Qigong nodded his head, pointed outside and raised a cooked half lamb leg in his hand and took a big bite.

Guo Jing quickly went to the window. He saw flashing swords in the clearing behind the tavern, eight, nine people were surrounding Huang Yaoshi. Seeing the enemy was fighting a multitude of opponents he was slightly relieved; but after looking clearly at who these people were, he could not help but feel surprised. He saw his Da Shifu Ke Zhen'E wielding his iron staff with a young Taoist priest standing behind him. He thought, "How come Da Shifu is also here?" He looked again and found out that the young priest was Qiu Chuji's disciple Yin Zhiping; who was wielding his long sword to protect Ke Zhen'E's back, not to attack Huang Yaoshi. The other six were all Taoist priests, they were Ma Yu, Qiu Chuji and the rest of the Quanzhen Six Masters.

Guo Jing watched for a moment and realized the Quanzhen Sect was using their Big Dipper Formation to fight the enemy. Only the Changzhen Zi [Eternal Truth] Tan Chuduan had died, so the 'tian xuan' [sky jade/gem] position was occupied by Ke Zhen'E. Too bad his martial art skill was not on par with the others, plus he was not familiar with the

formation, so Yin Zhiping was protecting his back while giving him directions. The Quanzhen Six Masters were brandishing their swords, advancing and retreating, dispersing and gathering together, keeping Huang Yaoshi inside their circle fighting an intense battle.

That day during the fierce battle at the Ox Village only two of the Quanzhen Seven Masters wielded their long swords; the rest of them were fighting using their bare palms, the battle was already very intense. This time there were seven long swords and one iron staff, so the fierceness was scary.

Huang Yaoshi remained barehanded; he floated around amidst the flashing swords and staff, as if he was forced to defend himself without being able to launch any counterattack; for dozens of moves he only moved around to avoid the enemies' blades without launching a single fist or kick. Guo Jing was secretly delighted, "Regardless of your resourcefulness, it will be difficult for you to run away from justice today."

Suddenly he saw that Huang Yaoshi swept his right foot around his body twice with his left foot firmly on the ground; compelling eight people to simultaneously withdraw three steps. "Excellent Sweeping Leaves Kick Technique!" Guo Jing praised.

Huang Yaoshi turned his head and waved his hand toward Hong and Guo two people upstairs and nodded his head in greeting. Guo Jing saw his face was relaxed and composed; he did not look like someone who was gasping for breath, which caused Guo Jing to be suspicious. He saw Huang Yaoshi's left palm sweep diagonally towards the top of Changsheng Zi [Eternal Life], Liu Chuxuan's head; so Huang Yaoshi had moved abruptly from defensive to offensive.

Actually Liu Chuxuan should not fend off against this palm; the 'tian quan' [sky power/authority], Qiu Chuji and the 'tian xuan' Ke Zhen'E should have made flank attacks from the side to rescue him; however, Ke Zhen'E was blind, unlike average people, he relied on his acute hearing, how could he guard against Huang Yaoshi's silent and brilliant palm technique? Qiu Chuji's sword flickered toward Huang Yaoshi's right armpit, Ke Zhen'E moved following Yin Zhiping's direction, but he was one step too late. Liu Chuxuan heard the palm slicing the wind just above his head, in his shock he threw himself to the ground and rolled away.

Ma Yu and Wang Chuyi realized the situation was critically dangerous, they launched a simultaneous flank attacks with their swords. Liu Chuxuan escaped the danger, but the Big Dipper Formation was broken. Huang Yaoshi laughed and dashed toward Sun Bu'er; he only moved for three steps, suddenly turned around and hit Guangning Zi [Infinite Peace] Hao Datong's chest. Hao Datong had never seen this kind of strange move, he hesitated slightly before stabbing his sword toward Huang Yaoshi's back. Huang Yaoshi moved like a rabbit, he broke through the encirclement and stood about two 'zhang's away from the crowd.

Hong Qigong laughed and said, "Old Heretic Huang, that was a very smart move!"

"I am going down," Guo Jing called out and moved toward the stairs.

"Slow down, slow down!" Hong Qigong said, "From the start your father-in-law has never hit back. At first I was worried about your Da Shifu, but looks like he does not have any intention to harm anybody."

Guo Jing returned to the window and asked, "How can you tell?"

Hong Qigong replied, "If he wanted to harm anybody, do you think that skinny monkey priest will still be alive? That little priest is not his match, not his match at all!" He took another bite at the lamb leg and said, "Before your father-in-law and Qiu Chuji arrived, I saw these old priests and your Da Shifu arrange their formation over there; but how can the Big Dipper Formation be learned in such a short time? Those old priests persuaded your Da Shifu to temporarily fill the empty position. Your Da Shifu clenched his teeth without saying anything. I don't know what enmity your Da Shifu has against your father-in-law. He followed that young priest to take the 'tian xuan' position; but in the end they still cannot block your father-in-law's deathly hand."

"He is not my father-in-law," Guo Jing said, full of hatred.

Hong Qigong was surprised, "Eh, what do you mean he is not your father-in-law?" he asked.

Clenching his teeth Guo Jing said, "He ... he ... humph!"

"How is Rong'er?" Hong Qigong asked, "You had an argument with her, didn't you?"

"It doesn't have anything to do with Rong'er," Guo Jing answered, "This old thief, he, he has killed my five shifus. My hatred to him is as deep as the ocean."

Hong Qigong jumped in surprise, he quickly asked, "Is that so?" But Guo Jing did not hear his question; his attention was focused on the fierce battle downstairs. By now the situation has changed, Huang Yaoshi was using his 'pi kong zhang fa' [splitting the air palm technique], creating strong gusts of wind, blocking his eight opponents' attacks.

Speaking about martial art skills of Ma Yu, Qiu Chuji, Wang Chuyi and the others, Huang Yaoshi should not be able to penetrate within a 'zhang' of their defense by relying on his bare palm only; but in the Big Dipper Formation they moved forward and backward together, Sun Bu'er, Ke Zhen'E and Yin Zhiping three people's martial art was comparatively weaker, as one person was compelled to draw back, the rest of the formation would have no choice but to follow. And so for each step forward everybody was forced to retreat two steps; they were separated farther and farther away from Huang Yaoshi, but the Big Dipper Formation was not the slightest bit chaotic.

By this time the Quanzhen Sect's long swords were already too far to reach Huang Yaoshi's body; it looked like he was just waiting for an opportunity to attack. Several moves later Hong Qigong said, "Hmm, so that's how it is."

"What is it?" Guo Jing busily asked.

Hong Qigong replied, "The Old Heretic Huang is deliberately forcing them to open up their formation, because he wants to learn the Big Dipper Formation's mystery; that's why he has not launched any killer attack yet. In less than ten moves he is going to reduce the circle once again."

Although Hong Qigong had lost his martial art power, his judgment was still very clear; and sure enough, Huang Yaoshi hacking palm's strength weakened and the Quanzhen Masters gradually tightened their encirclement. In less than a time to drink tea later everybody crowded together into one lump of people. Liu Chuxuan, Qiu Chuji, Wang Chuyi and Hao Datong were simultaneously stabbing their swords into Huang Yaoshi's body, but somehow when their swords almost reached Huang Yaoshi's skin, they all missed by several inches. If not for their fast reactions,

these four swords would have pierced a hole on their fellow apprentice's body.

Fighting in this tight circle the difference between one move to the other was only a hair's width. Guo Jing knew that as soon as Huang Yaoshi was well acquainted with the formation he would not leisurely fight these people anymore. To break the formation he must struck the weakest link, which was his Da Shifu and Yin Zhiping two people. He was too far from those people, if the situation became critical he would not have time to help, while right now he saw dangerous situations occur one after another. "Disciple goes down," he said to Hong Qigong. Without waiting for an answer he dashed downstairs.

When he got near the battle situation was again changed; Huang Yaoshi continuously moved toward Ma Yu's left side, but the more he moved the farther away he was from the crowd, as if he was trying to run away. Guo Jing held the dagger in his hand, ready to pound as soon as he had the opportunity. Suddenly Wang Chuyi let out a whistle and he, along with Hao Datong and Sun Bu'er, who formed the handle of the Big Dipper, turned forward from the left, to keep Huang Yaoshi in the middle of the formation.

Huang Yaoshi changed his position three times, but Wang Chuyi also moved the handle of the Big Dipper, just like Qiu Chuji was also moving the four stars of the Dipper, preventing Huang Yaoshi from occupying the position by Ma Yu's left side. As he was making his fourth attempt suddenly Guo Jing understood, "Ah, right, he wants to steal the north polar star position."

When he was treating his injury at the Ox Village, from behind the wall he saw the Quanzhen Seven Masters fought Mai Chaofeng, and later on Huang Yaoshi, using the Big Dipper Formation. Later on he learned in detail from Huang

Rong the Big Dipper constellation and the north polar star; he knew that the 'tian shu' [sky pivot] and 'tian xuan' [sky jade/gem] were linked in a straight line with the north polar star. Since the north polar star is always on the north, every night the Big Dipper constellation would revolve around this star. Later on he was captured by the Beggar Clan on Mount Jun at the Dongting Lake, again he pondered about this Big Dipper constellation; not only did he gain more than a few understanding of the Big Dipper characteristics, but also the movement of the Big Dipper Formation, and applied this ingenious method to advance his own martial art skill.

Huang Yaoshi's intelligence was a hundred folds better than Guo Jing's; he was also well-versed in astronomy and the study of yin-yang wu hang [lit. negative and positive five lines]. After he failed to break the Quanzhen Seven Masters' Big Dipper Formation during the battle at the Ox Village he meditated over this for a long time, until he finally comprehended the flaw of this formation.

Guo Jing was thinking about this formation because he wanted to 'learn' it; while Huang Yaoshi thought it was not worth his time to learn Wang Chongyang's technique, so he concentrated on 'breaking' the formation. He knew that all he needed to do was to snatch the north polar star position, and the formation would break; or at least if he occupied the central position, he would be able to control the formation, he could wait leisurely for the enemy to be exhausted, while he himself would stand in an invincible position.

The Quanzhen Masters were also aware that he was trying to break the formation by stealing the crucial position; they were inwardly anxious. If Tan Chuduan were still alive, the seven of them could move as one body, certainly they would not let Huang Yaoshi steal the north polar star position. This

time the 'tian xuan' was occupied by Ke Zhen'E and Yin Zhiping; which, admittedly had inferior martial art skill, and were not familiar with the formation technique, as a result the Big Dipper Formation's effectiveness was significantly reduced.

Ma Yu and the others knew that a prolonged fight would not do them any good; moreover, Guo Jing was standing on the side, if Huang Yaoshi was in a real danger, as a son-in-law, how could he not help? But their martial uncle's and brother's death must be avenged. Their deceased master Wang Chongyang was the number one martial artist of the world; if six of his disciples joined forces against one Huang Yaoshi and still could not gain any victory, the reputation of Quanzhen Sect would be ruined.

They heard Huang Yaoshi laugh and say, "I didn't know Chongyang's disciples are so stubborn that they do not know what's good for them!" While talking he moved swiftly towards Sun Bu'er and hacked with his palms three times. Ma Yu and Hao Datong raised their swords to rescue her. Huang Yaoshi slightly leaned sideways to evade the swords, 'swish! swish! swish!' he hacked three more times toward Sun Bu'er.

The Master of the Peach Blossom Island's palm technique was naturally very exquisite. Even if Wang Chongyang lived again, or Hong Qigong recovered from his injury, they would not be able to evade these six palms easily; how could Sun Bu'er block them off? She saw the palm was coming swiftly, she had no choice but to brandish her sword in a flower pattern and furiously protect her face with all her might. Suddenly Huang Yaoshi swept his legs repeatedly and kicked her six times. These 'luo ying shen jian zhang' [falling (leaves) divine sword palm technique] and 'sao ye tui' [sweeping leaves kick technique] were the Peach Blossom Island's 'kuang feng jue ji' [fierce wind



stunt/unique skill]; if the enemy did not retreat within the first six moves, the next six moves would follow, faster than the previous ones. Within six by six, thirty six moves even if a hero or a warrior could avoid the slap, he would not be able to evade the kick.

Ma Yu and the others noticed that Huang Yaoshi concentrated his ferocious attack toward Sun Bu'er; immediately they came to her rescue, as a result, in this pressing situation the formation became disorderly. Ke Zhen'E was blind, so the movement of the formation was somewhat delayed; Huang Yaoshi let out a long laugh and he was already on Ke Zhen'E's back. "Aiyo!" suddenly Ke Zhen'E heard someone cry out in midair, that person was flying to the top of the roof of the Misty Rain Tavern. It turned out that Huang Yaoshi grabbed Yin Zhiping's back and threw him away.

The gap in the formation was getting bigger. Without giving the enemy any opportunity to mend the formation, Huang Yaoshi dashed toward Ma Yu, fully expecting Ma Yu to evade. To his surprise as his sword fended off the attack, the sword in Ma Yu's left hand went straight toward Huang Yaoshi's eyebrow; his movement was steady, backed by a profound internal energy.

Huang Yaoshi was forced to lean sideways to evade, he could not restrain from praising, "Good! You deserve to be the Quanzhen Sect's head disciple." Suddenly his leg swept downward, kicking Hao Datong's leg while at the same time he stooped down to snatch Hao Datong's sword and stabbed it toward his chest. Liu Chuxuan was shocked; he wielded his sword to parry. Huang Yaoshi laughed a big laugh and flicked his hand. 'Crack!' both swords were broken.

A dark green shadow flashed, the Master of the Peach Blossom Island was moving toward the north polar star position. By this moment the formation was in total chaos, nobody was able to stop him. The Quanzhen Masters cried out bitterly, they knew Huang Yaoshi was about to exercise mastery over them. Ma Yu heaved a deep sigh and was about to throw his sword to admit defeat and ready to take whatever punishment the enemy would send their way. Suddenly he saw the dark green shadow flashed back; there was already someone occupying the north polar star position. It was Guo Jing.

Among the Quanzhen Masters, only Qiu Chuji was overjoyed; he had seen Guo Jing staked it all in attacking Huang Yaoshi at the Drunken Immortal Tavern. Ma Yu and Wang Chuyi knew Guo Jing was kind-hearted and honest; even though they thought he was going to help his father-in-law, certainly he would not harm his own shifu Ke Zhen'E. The rest of the Masters were shocked, they saw Guo Jing had already occupied the north polar star position; as soon as these father-in-law and son-in-law joined hands, Quanzhen Sect would die without any burial place. But they were even more surprised to see Guo Jing was attacking Huang Yaoshi with a bare left palm and a sword in his right hand.

As he succeeded in breaking the formation, Huang Yaoshi wanted to force Quanzhen Sect to admit they were wrong; who would have thought that suddenly someone was occupying the north polar star position. His attention was focused on fighting the Quanzhen Masters, so without looking back he sent his palm backward using the 'pi kong zhang' toward the enemy's chest. That person stretched out his left palm to parry the incoming force, yet he did not move even for half a step. Huang Yaoshi was surprised, he thought, "Very few people in the world have the strength to

block my palm, who is this person?" He turned his head to look and saw that it was Guo Jing.

By this time Huang Yaoshi was surrounded by the enemies front and rear; if he could not drive Guo Jing away, the Big Dipper Formation would outflank him from behind and that would put him in a very dangerous situation. He sent out three palm attacks in succession toward Guo Jing, one palm was fiercer than the last, but each time Guo Jing simply blocked it away. The fourth palm contain a fake and a real attack, expecting Guo Jing to take advantage of an opening and launch a counterattack; who would have thought that Guo Jing only took a defensive position and did not counterattack. Guo Jing lifted the dagger up in front of his chest, while his left palm slowly swept across his own lower abdomen. In this way although he received one stance with two attacks from Huang Yaoshi, both attacks were neutralized.

Huang Yaoshi was startled, he thought, "This dumb kid knew how to defend and break the formation; he steadily defending the north polar star position and did not want to move even half a step. Ah, right, he must have received Quanzhen Masters' instruction and came here to help them to fight me."

He did not know that his guess was only half correct. Guo Jing did indeed know the secret of the Big Dipper Formation, but he learned it from the Nine Yin Manual and not from the Quanzhen Masters. As Guo Jing was facing the enemy with whom he held an enormous enmity, he suppressed his anger to keep his position; it was as if his feet were firmly planted to the ground, he simply turned his eyes blind to whatever trick Huang Yaoshi used to tempt him to attack.

Huang Yaoshi groaned silently; he thought, "This dumb kid doesn't know when to proceed and when to retreat! Humph! Even if Rong'er blames me, I am going to hurt you today; otherwise you won't want to back off." His left hand made a circle about seven inches in front of his chest, his right palm rode on the left hand; borrowing the strength from the left hand it was propelled forward, the force doubled. But before it hit Guo Jing's face, he suddenly remembered, "If he doesn't evade, this palm will certainly cause him a heavy injury. Whatever the reason, Rong'er will not be happy for the rest of her life."

Guo Jing saw him borrow the strength of his left hand to launch a palm attack, he knew the incoming force would not be a small matter; gritting his teeth he launched the 'xian long zai tian' [dragon appears on the field], a stake-it-all stance from the Eighteen Dragon Subduing Palms. He realized his martial art was far inferior to the enemy's; he would suffer serious injury if he took the incoming palm head-on, but in order to evade the attack, he would have to leave the north polar star position, which would set him back into a more difficult situation. Hence in this one move he was ready to sacrifice his own life. Who would have thought that as his palm was about a foot away from his face, Huang Yaoshi suddenly withdrew his attack and called out, "Dumb Kid, go away! Why do you make things difficult for me?"

Guo Jing held his sword tight, he looked at Huang Yaoshi with full attention to protect himself against any trick he might do; he did not reply. By now the Quanzhen Masters had already reorganized their formation; they made encirclement some distance away from Huang Yaoshi's back, waiting for an opportunity to attack.

"Where is Rong'er?" Huang Yaoshi asked.

Guo Jing still did not answer, his face looked gloomy, his eyes spouted anger. Seeing his expression Huang Yaoshi's suspicion grew; he was afraid his daughter had met some accident. "What did you do to her? Speak up!" he barked.

Guo Jing gritted his teeth and bit his lips; his right hand, which was holding the sword, slightly trembled. Huang Yaoshi's attention was focused on him; each slight movement Guo Jing made did not escape his eyes. Seeing Guo Jing's unusual expression he was even more alarmed. "Why is your hand trembling? Why aren't you talking?" he called out.

Guo Jing recalled how his shifus died a horrible death on the Peach Blossom Island, grief and indignation burst forth in his heart; his body shook violently, his eyes bloodshot. Seeing him not willing to talk, tears streaming down his face, Huang Yaoshi was more alarmed. He knew his daughter had a heated argument with Guo Jing over the Princess Huazheng's affair; he was afraid Guo Jing had killed Huang Rong. He kicked his feet and pounced forward.

As soon as Huang Yaoshi made his move Qiu Chuji thrust his long sword out, at the same time the Big Dipper Formation started to move. Wang Chuyi and Hao Datong attacked from Huang Yaoshi's left and right, one with sword in his hand, the other with a bare palm. Guo Jing's palm neutralized the incoming attack, while his dagger stung with a lightning speed to make a counterattack move. Huang Yaoshi did not fend it off; he flipped his hand over trying to seize the dagger. Although his movement was accurate and swift, Wang Chuyi's sword had already arrived at his back; he had no choice but to twist his waist to evade, and thus his fingers missed Guo Jing's dagger by two inches. Guo Jing used this opportunity to stab forward. This

fierce battle was several times more intense than the previous one.

The Quanzhen Masters' sole desire was to kill Huang Yaoshi to avenge Zhou Botong and Tan Chuduan. Huang Yaoshi knew perfectly well that there was a misunderstanding here, but he was a proud man, he also felt that as someone of higher rank it would be beneath his dignity to explain. He wanted to defeat them completely; to make them throw their swords and surrender, and then he would make everything clear. Thereupon he launched attack after attack while being lenient; otherwise, although Ma Yu, Qiu Chuji and the others might be able to defend themselves, but how could Sun Bu'er and Yin Zhiping keep their lives? Unexpectedly Guo Jing appeared and not only he did not help Huang Yaoshi, but it seemed like he hated Huang Yaoshi to his death. Huang Yaoshi thought that if Guo Jing did not kill Huang Rong, why was he so afraid of him?

This time Huang Yaoshi did not show any mercy; he wanted to grab Guo Jing and ask for some explanation. If Guo Jing did indeed kill Huang Rong, even if he tore him apart to pieces it would not be enough to vent his anger. Unfortunately Guo Jing occupied the north polar star position; although Yin Zhiping had not crawled down from the Misty Rain Tavern's roof, the battle situation had been reversed. The Big Dipper Formation moved like a billowing wave; they launched offensive moves without ceasing.

Huang Yaoshi tried several times to penetrate Guo Jing's defense but failed, he started to get impatient. Each time he launched a fierce attack the Quanzhen Masters were always there to block him. He wanted to launch a deathly attack and kill some of them to break the formation, but the Big Dipper Formation gradually tightened its encirclement. He started to think that although he could shake himself loose, it would be difficult for him to escape unscathed.

Fighting for a while Ma Yu pointed his sword and called out, "Hold on!"

The Quanzhen Masters held their hands, firmly stood on their respective positions. Ma Yu said, "Huang Daozhu [Island Master Huang], you are a prominent grandmaster of your martial art school; how can we, the younger generation, dare to offend you? Today we rely on sheer number to fight you; it is because the situation forces us to do so. We want to know how you are going to settle the blood debts of our Zhou Shishu [martial uncle] and Tan Shidi [martial (younger) brother]!"

With a cold laugh Huang Yaoshi said, "What else there is to say? Just go ahead and kill the Old Heretic Huang to protect the Quanzhen Sect's reputation; won't that be great? Be on your guard!" Without moving his body or lifting up his arm his right palm had already chopped toward Ma Yu's face.

Ma Yu tried to evade sideways in panic, but Huang Yaoshi's palm came without warning; this feign hack was immediately followed by the real attack. This combination of void and solid was a killer stance from the 'luo ying shen jian zhang fa'. Huang Yaoshi had perfected it for ten years; he intended to use it in the second sword meet of Mount Hua. This stance was not designed to fight a group of enemies, but it was very effective in a one on one combat. Danyang Zi's [Scarlet Sun] skill might be profound, but how could he be the Eastern Heretic's match?

It would be better if Ma Yu did not evade; once he moved to the right, the second attack came. Ma Yu groaned inwardly, "Not good!" He was going to block by stretching out his hand, but the enemy's palm had already arrived at his chest. As soon as Huang Yaoshi exerted his strength, Ma Yu's internal organs would be shaken and he would suffer serious internal injury.

The Quanzhen Five Masters were shocked; swords and palms came to the rescue, but how could there still be time? They saw Ma Yu was at the point of death, surprisingly Huang Yaoshi laughed and withdrew his palm; he said, "If I break your formation this way, you won't accept your defeat easily. The Old Heretic Huang may die, but how can I let myself be the laughingstock of all the heroes under the sky? Good Priests, come, let us fight!"

Liu Chuxuan snorted and shook his fist, Wang Chuyi followed with his sword; the Big Dipper Formation was ready to go into action. It was to be the seventeenth stance, Wang Chuyi was supposed to move after Ma Yu. He stabbed his sword into the air, ready to strike; but Ma Yu did not move forward, on the contrary, he retreated two steps backward and called out, "Hold it!" Everybody held their steps again. Ma Yu said, "Huang Daozhu, thank you for holding your hand."

"You flattered me," Huang Yaoshi replied.

Ma Yu said, "Reasonably said, right now wanbei's [younger generation, he was referring to himself] life should have been gone, and this formation developed by my deceased master should have been broken by you. If we know good from evil, we should admit defeat and throw ourselves at your mercy. But we do not dare not to seek revenge because of our deep enmity with you. After this matter is settled, wanbei will slash my own throat as a gesture of gratitude toward Daozhu."

Huang Yaoshi's expression was gloomy, he waved his hand and said, "It's useless to talk too much, you can just begin. The matter of kindness and enmity in this world is difficult to understand."



Guo Jing thought, "Turned out Ma Daozhang and the others fight him to avenge their Shisu and Shidi. But Zhou Dage [Big Brother Zhou] is still alive and well, also Tan Daozhang's death has nothing to do with Huang Daozhu. However, if I explain the real situation the Quanzhen Masters will withdraw themselves from the battle, leaving Da Shifu and me two people; how can we be his match? Let's not talk about avenging Shifus' death, we can't even guarantee we will still be alive by the time we are done." But then he remembered, "If I do not tell the truth, how am I going to be different from a coward? Shifus often said that we might lose our head, but not our righteousness." Thereupon with a loud and clear voice he said, "Ma Daozhang, Qiu Daozhang, Wang Daozhang, your Zhou Shisu has not died yet; and it was Ouyang Feng who killed Tan Daozhang."

"What did you say?" Qiu Chuji was surprised. Thereupon Guo Jing recounted how he treated his injury inside a secret room at the Ox Village, how from behind the wall he saw and heard Qiu Qianzhang fabricate a rumor to incite both sides to fight each other, how Ouyang Feng place the blame on Huang Yaoshi, he told them everything. Although he was clumsy with words, everybody understood his explanation very clearly.

The Quanzhen Masters were listening, half believing and half doubting. Qiu Chuji loudly asked, "Are you telling the truth?"

Guo Jing pointed his finger to Huang Yaoshi and said, "Disciple hates this old thief that I do not wish to live in the same earth with him, why would I help him? Only it was the truth, so disciple cannot keep his mouth shut."

The Six Masters knew him as an honest person; moreover, he had shown so much hatred toward Huang Yaoshi, so

what he said must be the truth.

It was beyond Huang Yaoshi's expectation to hear him saying things in his favor; he was astonished and asked, "Why do you hate me so much? Where is Rong'er?"

Ke Zhen'E cut him off, "You don't know what you did? Jing'er, although we can't win, we must fight this old thief to our deaths." Finished speaking he lifted his iron staff and swept it toward Huang Yaoshi.

Hearing his shifu, Guo Jing knew that he was forgiven; he felt very happy and immediately tears flowed down his face. "Da Shifu," he called out, "Er Shifu and the others, they ... all five of them died a miserable death!"

Huang Yaoshi was grabbing the head of Ke Zhen'E staff with an outstretched hand, he turned to Guo Jing and asked, "What did you say? Zhu Cong, Han Baoju and the others were nicely received as guests on my island, why did you say they are dead?"

Ke Zhen'E furiously tried to pull his iron staff, but it did not even budge. Huang Yaoshi asked Guo Jing again, "Disregarding your elders and superiors you talked nonsense to me, attacking me like crazy, is that because of Zhu Cong and the others?"

Guo Jing's eyes looked like they were spurting blood; he called out, "You have harmed my five Shifus with your own hands, and now you pretend you did not know?" Lifting his dagger up, he stabbed it forward with a straight arm.

Huang Yaoshi moved the iron staff in his hand to block; 'bang!' the staff and the dagger collided, sparks flew out everywhere. The dagger was so sharp that it actually nicked the iron staff. Huang Yaoshi asked again, "Who saw it?"

Guo Jing said, "I buried my Five Shifus with my own hands, are you saying that I slander you?"

Hung Yaoshi laughed coldly and said, "So what if you slander me? For all my life the Old Heretic Huang come and go alone; why would I deny killing these several people? You are correct, I killed your shifus!"

Suddenly a female voice was calling out, "No, Father, it wasn't you. Don't take the blame on your own shoulder."

Everybody turned their heads around and saw the one who spoke was indeed Huang Rong. They had been so engrossed in the fierce battle that nobody knew she had arrived. As Guo Jing saw her again, he was lost in thought, he did not know whether he should feel happy or anxious.

As Huang Yaoshi saw his daughter was alive and well, he was very happy; his hatred toward Guo Jing disappeared, he laughed a big laugh and said, "Good child, come, let Father hug you."

For the past several days Huang Rong had been suffering a lot of heartache, it was only today she heard a loving word for the first time; she dashed forward and threw herself into her father's bosom and cried, "Father, this dumb kid slandered you, he ... he also bullied me."

Huang Yaoshi embraced his daughter and said with a smile, "The Old Heretic Huang always does as he pleases, ever since dozens of years ago ignorant people have always put the crime of the world on your father's head, so what difference will it make to add several more crimes to the pile? The Five Freaks of Jiangnan were your Mei Shijie's [martial (older) sister] archenemies, so of course I killed them with my own hands."

“No, no,” Huang Rong anxiously said, “It wasn’t you. I know it wasn’t you.”

Huang Yaoshi showed a faint smile and said, “That dumb kid is so bold, he dares to bully my good child. Just watch, Father will teach him a lesson.” He had just finished speaking when suddenly like a lightning the back of his palm struck, without a shadow, without a trace. Guo Jing was thinking about what these father and daughter were talking about, when ‘slap!’ he felt a burning sensation on his left cheek. He was just about to raise his hand to block, but Huang Yaoshi’s palm had already returned to Huang Rong’s head, gently stroking her elegant hair.

This palm made a loud noise, but actually the force was weak; Guo Jing felt his cheek burning, but he did not suffer any injury. He was at a loss; did not know whether he should charge forward or he should stay where he was.

Ke Zhen’E heard the slap on Guo Jing’s face, he was afraid Huang Yaoshi might have stricken him with a deadly blow. “Jing’er, how are you?” he anxiously asked.

“I am all right,” Guo Jing replied.

Ke Zhen’E said, “Don’t listen to this demon and this witch telling lies. I don’t have eyes to see, but your Si Shifu [Fourth Shifu] said: he saw this old thief killed your Er Shifu and forced to death your Qi [Seventh] ...” Guo Jing did not wait for him to finish, he charged forward toward Huang Yaoshi. Ke Zhen’E followed by wielding his iron staff.

Huang Yaoshi let his daughter go and evaded Guo Jing’s palm, while at the same time stretched his hand to grab Ke Zhen’E’s iron staff. This time Ke Zhen’E had guarded against his grab so that Huang Yaoshi missed the staff. Master and disciple joined hands fighting a tight battle with Huang Yaoshi.

Although Guo Jing had repeatedly met some outstandingly able people and had learned not a few of wonderful martial art skills, he was still too far behind compared to this grandmaster of a martial art school, the Master of the Peach Blossom Island. Even with Ke Zhen'E's help he could not do much. After only about twenty, thirty moves he had already moved his hands and feet with great difficulty.

Qiu Chuji thought, "In a critical time Quanzhen Sect has received these master and disciple's help; currently these two are in the brink of defeat, how can we sit down and watch without doing anything? Whether Zhou Shishu is alive or dead, we need to defeat the Old Heretic Huang first, then we'll talk later." Brandishing his sword he called out, "Ke Daxia [Chivalrous Hero], go back to your position!"

By this time Yin Zhiping had already crawled down from the Misty Rain Tavern's roof. Although he was black and blue and had a swollen nose from the fall, he did not suffer a serious injury. He rushed toward Ke Zhen'E's back and wielded his sword to protect him. Once again the Big Dipper Formation went into action, encircled Huang Yaoshi, father and daughter in the middle.

Huang Yaoshi was enraged, he thought, "Before it was a misunderstanding, so I can understand you attacking me; but after this dumb kid explained everything this crowd of mixed-up hairs still rely on sheer numbers to attack me. Do you think the Old Heretic Huang cannot kill people?" Like a flash of shadow he had already moved toward Ke Zhen'E's left.

Huang Rong saw the murderous look on her father's face; she knew his hands would not be light, her heart turned cold. She saw that Wang Chuyi and Ma Yu blocked her father's palm; Ke Zhen'E's iron staff ferociously struck toward her shoulder while his mouth shot curses,

“Unforgivable lowly criminal, female demon! The Peach Blossom Island’s slut!”

Huang Rong had never been willing to swallow the least bit of defeat; listening him open up his mouth in foul language, anger started to rise up her chest, she called out, “Scold me again if you have guts!”

The Seven Freaks of Jiangnan grew up in the marketplace where all kinds of people buy and sell, cursing each other for generations, what was so difficult about scolding other people? Ke Zhen'E hated Huang Yaoshi, father and daughter; listened to her say so, immediately his extensive vocabulary of malicious words flew out of his mouth. Huang Rong had always lived alone since she was little; she never had any experience with this kind of foul language. To her advantage she was very intelligent so that each time Ke Zhen'E scolded she was able to figure out what he was talking about and even scold him back; but afterwards the more she listened the more she could not talk back, because the more she did not understand. She spat and said, “Shame on you! You are someone’s shifu yet you are not afraid to have a filthy mouth.”

Ke Zhen'E scolded back, “With a clean person the old man talks clean words, with stinky and lowly people I speak filthy words! You are a filthy person, so the old man here talks even dirtier words.”

Huang Rong was angry; she raised her bamboo stick toward Ke Zhen'E's face. Ke Zhen'E returned the attack with his iron staff; who would have thought that the Dog Beating Stick Technique was extremely marvelous beyond his imagination. Only several moves later his iron staff was completely under Huang Rong's control, using the 'lead' letter of the technique; as the stick went east the staff went

east, when the stick went west the staff followed, it totally did not have the mind of its own.

Ke Zhen'E was occupying the 'tian xuan' position of the Formation. As soon as his movement was restrained, the entire formation's movement was somewhat restricted. Qiu Chuji's flickering sword stabbing Huang Rong's back, his intention was to help Ke Zhen'E; but Huang Rong relied on the armor she was wearing, to his surprise she ignored the stab, changing her stick movement she sent out three stances in succession. Qiu Chuji's sword was about to touch her clothes when he suddenly thought, "What kind of person is the Old Qiu, how can I harm this little girl?" The tip of his sword touched Huang Rong's back, but he did not push further.

Taking advantage of this slight hesitation Huang Rong's bamboo stick pulled Ke Zhen'E's iron staff. Borrowing his 'fu mo zhang fa' [demon subduing staff technique] energy Huang Rong push the staff down and then jerked it up to the left. Ke Zhen'E was not able to control his strength; the staff left his grasp and flew to the air, 'splash!' it fell into the Nan Hu [South Lake].

Wang Chuyi was afraid Huang Rong might use this opportunity to harm Ke Zhen'E; he rushed in front of Ke Zhen'E with his sword blocking in front of his chest. Although his experience was vast, he had never seen the Dog Beating Technique before, so he was caught in surprise.

Seeing his master suffer a setback, Guo Jing called out, "Da Shifu, go and take a rest, I'll fight for you." Leaving the north polar star position he jumped into the 'tian xuan' position. By this time his martial art skill had already exceeded those of the Quanzhen Masters, plus he was

familiar with the Big Dipper method; so as soon as he made his move the Formation's power increased substantially.

Actually the Big Dipper Formation revolved around the 'tian quan' position, but as soon as he entered, the key position moved to 'tian xuan' position, and the Formation's movement was altered. This modification was actually inferior to the original movement, but in this short moment Huang Yaoshi was not able to find a way to penetrate the formation's airtight defense; although he had his daughter to help, they were defending themselves with difficulty. Luckily for the most part the Quanzhen Masters took a defensive position; Guo Jing was the only one who fought with his life, forcing Huang Yaoshi to reluctantly face him.

Guo Jing kept pressing forward, forcing Huang Yaoshi to fight a tight battle. With the Quanzhen Masters backing Guo Jing up, Huang Yaoshi was not able to inflict any injury to him, and was forced to use his 'qing gong' [lightness kungfu] to evade Guo Jing's series of a mad-tiger-like attacks.

Huang Rong saw that Guo Jing's normally genial and kind face was now enveloped by a layer of murderous look; his expression was so frighteningly ferocious that he looked like a different person, completely different from the Guo Jing she used to know. She was startled and frightened at the same time; she stepped in front of her father and said, "Kill me first!"

Guo Jing glowered at her and barked, "Get out of my way!"

Huang Rong was taken aback, "How can you speak to me like that?" she thought.

Guo Jing charged forward and shoved her aside then he pounced towards Huang Yaoshi. Suddenly he heard someone laughed loudly and called out behind him, "Don't



worry Yao Xiong [Brother Yao], I have come to help you!" His voice was like ear-piercing grating metals.

Nobody dared to turn their bodies right away; the entire Big Dipper Formation turned around Huang Yaoshi's back before they finally saw five, six tall and short people standing on the lakeside, led by someone with long arms and long legs, which was none other than the Western Poison Ouyang Feng.

The Quanzhen Six Masters cried out in anger. Qiu Chuji said, "Jing'er, let us settle the debt with the Western Poison first!" His long sword raised, the Quanzhen Six Masters surrounded Ouyang Feng. Who would have thought that Guo Jing's gaze was fixed on Huang Yaoshi; it seemed like he did not hear Qiu Chuji at all. As soon as the Quanzhen Six Masters left, he pounced toward Huang Yaoshi again and in a short moment two people had quickly exchanged five, six moves.

Both sides did not hit their target, so both leaped backward, looking over their shoulders, staring at each other. Guo Jing gave out a loud shout then attacked forward. Several times they exchanged several stances and then separated again.

This time the Quanzhen Six Masters had rearranged their battle formation. They looked at Ke Zhen'E and saw him barehanded, standing behind Huang Yaoshi, his head inclined, listening attentively; his arms were open wide, revealing his intention to sacrifice himself, throwing himself to grab Huang Yaoshi firmly, giving Guo Jing the opportunity to strike Huang Yaoshi's vital point. Because of this Qiu Chuji beckoned to Yin Zhiping, telling him to occupy the 'tian xuan' position.

Ma Yu loudly recited, "Holding hands the departed soul forcing itself to leave like a bead of pearls. Heart opens to hear the sound of nature, unlike the blowing flute!" It was the poem Tan Chuduan recited just before he closed his eyes. As the Quanzhen Masters heard it, their anger rose; with flickering swords and floating palms they attacked Ouyang Feng together.

The snake staff in Ouyang Feng's hand pushed and pulled abruptly, forcing the seven Quanzhen people to back off. Ouyang Feng had seen the Big Dipper Formation's fierceness at the Ox Village; he was quite intimidated by that, so he decided to keep a tight defense and wait for the enemy to reveal its own flaw. Once the Big Dipper Formation unfolded, it struck to the front and hit to the back, like a continuous wave of attacks. Ouyang Feng carefully met stance with stance, while opening his eyes wide to see any potential to break the formation. A moment later he noticed Yin Zhiping's 'tian xuan' was the Formation's weak link. He thought if he could destroy this link, he did not have anything else to fear; therefore, he brandished the snake staff in his hand trying to inflict some harm, while his eyes scanning around, assessing the situation around him.

Guo Jing and Huang Yaoshi were still engaged in a tight combat. Huang Rong moved her bamboo stick to keep Ke Zhen'E more than a 'zhang' away from these two people. She kept shouting, "Please stop fighting; please listen to me!" But Guo Jing turned a deaf ear to her; palm by palm he struck ferociously, in total disregard of his own life.

At first Huang Rong saw her father holding back, but Guo Jing kept provoking him so that gradually she saw his anger rise, his hands were getting heavier and heavier. She knew the situation was critical; either one of them would certainly suffer a heavy injury if he made a slight mistake. She lifted

his head and saw Hong Qigong was leaning against the railing of the Misty Rain Tavern, watching the battle. “Shifu, Shifu,” she hastily called, “Come down and help me explain everything.”

Hong Qigong has seen early on that the situation was far from good, he regretted losing his martial art skill and was powerless to settle this dispute, and hence he was really anxious. Hearing Huang Rong cry out he had an idea, “If only the Old Heretic Huang still has some respect to me left, I think I can still do something.” His hands pressed on the railing and he floated in the air coming down. “Everybody hold your hand!” he called out, “The Old Beggar has something to say.” The Nine-fingered Divine Beggar had such a prestige in the Jianghu that when they saw his sudden appearance everybody’s heart shivered and they could not help but to stop fighting.

Ouyang Feng was the first to secretly groan, he thought, “How can the Old Beggar’s martial art come back?” He did not know that after listening to Guo Jing’s explanation on the Sanskrit part of the Nine Yin Manual Hong Qigong spent these past few days to practice according to the technique and was able to open up his ‘qi jing ba mai’ [marvelous/mysterious passage 8 pulses, Eight Extraordinary Channels].

Hong Qigong’s martial art skill was very profound to begin with, after listening to an excellent internal energy secret such as treating one’s own internal injury, with his divine comprehension within this short period of time he managed to open up one of the eight pulses; his lightness kungfu was 30, 40% recovered. Strictly speaking, if he were involved in a brawl just relying on his fists’ and palms’ strength, he could not even defeat a strong man who did not know any martial art. But in leaping up and down his movement was

light and lively, at least in Ouyang Feng's eyes he did not look like someone who was devoid of any internal strength.

Hong Qigong was amazed to see these people were still in awe of him, he considered it carefully, "If the Old Beggar does not put on some airs, today's crisis will be difficult to resolve; but what can I say, so that the Quanzhen Masters will listen to my order, and also the Old Poison will comply without giving me too much difficulty?" Momentarily not knowing what to do he threw his head backward and laughed a big laugh; while he was looking up, he saw the moon was beginning to rise up, the bright circle looked like a wheel made of ice with one side of it slightly broken. An idea came into his mind, he said, "You are all experts in the Wulin world, but you deal with each other just like scoundrels and rascals, your words are just like farts."

Everybody was startled. They knew Hong Qigong always talked crazy words without any restrain, so they did not think much about his language; however, he must have a reason to say such thing. Ma Yu bowed in respect and asked, "Asking Qianbei [Senior] to grant us instruction."

Hong Qigong angrily said, "The Old Beggar heard some people say that on the eighth month's mid-autumn day this year there will be people fighting at the Misty Rain Tavern. The Old Beggar was afraid that his hearing was not clear, so while it is still early I want to laze around and sleep in peace and quiet here. Who knew that since early this morning I have been hearing clackety-clack and yakety-yak of people quarreling and fighting nonstop. I heard chamber pot formation or bed urinal formation, and then there was a husband beating his wife, a son-in-law attacking his father-in-law; very noisy just like killing pig or slaughtering dog, so noisy that the Old Beggar cannot take a nap in peace and quiet. Look at the moon, what day is today?"

Listening to his speech everybody remembered that today was the fourteenth of the eighth month, so the martial art contest was going to be the next day. Besides, Peng Lianhu, Sha Tongtian and their company had not arrived yet, so fighting today did not make much sense. Qiu Chuji said, "Lao Qianbei [Senior] is right, we should not have made disturbance here today." He turned his head toward Ouyang Feng and said, "Ouyang Feng, let us find someplace else to decide who will be alive and who will be dead."

"Wonderful, wonderful," Ouyang Feng laughed, "I'll gladly accompany you."

Hong Qigong's face turned sour, he said, "As soon as Wang Chongyang returned to heaven, the Quanzhen Sect's bunch of mixed-up hair has become a reckless empty-headed bunch. Let me tell you something: five priests and one priestess, plus a little priest with low martial art skill, all of you join hands, you are still not the Old Poison's match. Wang Chongyang has never left anything good for me; it is none of the Old Beggar's business whether the bunch of mixed-up hairs will be alive or dead, but let me ask you this: you have a martial art contest appointment tomorrow, who will keep the appointment? Will seven dead Taoists be able to fight?"

This speech sounded like he was ridiculing the Quanzhen priests, but in it he reminded them that by fighting Ouyang Feng they would die and would not live. The seven of them could not defeat Huang Yaoshi then, obviously now they were not Ouyang Feng's match. All of the Six Masters were experienced Jianghu characters, how could they fail to catch the real meaning of his speech? But they were facing their archenemy right now, how could they cower?

With the corner of his eye Hong Qigong saw Guo Jing was staring angrily at Huang Yaoshi; while Huang Rong was

crying with tears streaming down her cheeks. He knew whatever it was, it must be a very complicated matter; he thought carefully, "I'll wait for the Old Urchin; with his martial art skill he will be able to subdue everybody. At that time the Old Beggar will speak again." Thereupon he shouted, "The Old Beggar is going to take a nap; whoever lift up his fist or his kick deliberately wants to offend me. Come tomorrow evening, I don't care if you turn the sky over or shake the earth, the Old Beggar will not help anybody. Ma Yu, take this bunch of mixed-up hairs and sit down here with me cultivating your internal energy. Make a one notch internal strength gain is a gain; waiting for the last minute will not guarantee your victory. Jing'er, Rong'er, come over here and massage my legs."

Ouyang Feng was rather scared of him; he thought that if Hong Qigong joined hands with the Quanzhen Masters, they would be difficult for him to fight. He said, "Old Beggar, Yao Xiong and I two guys have some unfinished business with the Quanzhen Sect. The Nine-fingered Divine Beggar's words are like mountain; I'll follow your direction today, and tomorrow you may not help either side."

Hong Qigong was secretly amused, "If you push me with your little finger now, I am afraid I will fall down." Thereupon he loudly said, "The Old Beggar's fart is still sweeter than your words; I said I won't help, then I won't help. Are you sure you'll win?" Then he laid down face up on the ground, using his wine gourd as a pillow and called out, "Two children, come and massage my legs!"

By now only the bone was left of the lamb leg in his hand, but he was still reluctant to throw it away, he kept gnawing and licking like it was still tasty. He looked at the clouds looming over the horizon and said, "Those clouds look strange, I am afraid the weather will change very soon!" He also noticed thin mist rose from the surface of the lake; he

took several deep breaths and shook his head, "It's very strange!" Turning his head toward Huang Yaoshi he said, "Yao Xiong, do you think I can borrow your daughter to massage my legs?"

Huang Yaoshi only showed a faint smile. Huang Rong came over and sat next to Hong Qigong, then started to massage his leg gently. Hong Qigong sighed, "Ay, these old bones have never enjoyed this kind of good fortune!" Staring at Guo Jing he said, "Dumb kid, are your dog's paws broken by the Old Heretic Huang?"

"Yes," Guo Jing replied. He came over the other side of Hong Qigong and started massaging his leg.

Ke Zhen'E was leaning on a willow tree by the lakeside; his pair of blind eyes was fixed at Huang Yaoshi. He was using his ears in place of his eyes. Huang Yaoshi was pacing around by the water. He walked to the east, Ke Zhen'E's head followed his movement to the east, he turned west Ke Zhen'E followed him to the west. Huang Yaoshi did not pay him any attention, only the corners of his mouth showed a cold smile.

The Quanzhen Six Masters and Yin Zhiping were sitting cross-legged on the ground, maintaining their respective positions of the Big Dipper Formation; their heads were hung low, they were quietly training their internal energy.

Ouyang Feng's servants, the snake shepherds, took out a table and a chair, set them up underneath the Misty Rain Tavern and served wine and food. With his back toward everybody else Ouyang Feng sat alone eating and drinking; he was wondering in his heart how Hong Qigong could recover that quick from the heavy injury his palm inflicted.

Meanwhile the weather was stifling hot, small insects were flying everywhere, and thin mist hovered on the surface of

the lake. Hong Qigong said, "My thigh bone is sore, a storm must be coming; if we can see moon tomorrow at the mid-autumn festival, I will chop my own thigh and give it to you." Casting a sidelong glance toward Guo Jing and Huang Rong, he noticed that their eyes had always looked somewhere else, and had never looked at each other. Hong Qigong was always frank and honest; seeing this awkward situation, how could he keep his peace? But after asking several questions, those two mumbled indistinctly without giving him any answer.

Hong Qigong raised his voice asking Huang Yaoshi, "Yao Xiong, what is the other name of this Nan Hu?"

"It's called 'yuan yang hu' [Mandarin Duck Lake]," Huang Yaoshi replied.

"Indeed!" Hong Qigong said, "How come on this 'yuan yang hu' [Translator's note: mandarin ducks have always been regarded as the symbol of lovers] your daughter and your son-in-law are having an argument and the father and father-in-law did not advise them?"

Guo Jing stood up immediately, he pointed to Huang Yaoshi and said, "He ... he ... has killed my five shifus, how can I still call him my father-in-law?"

Huang Yaoshi coldly laughed and said, "Is that strange? The Seven Freaks of Jiangnan are not completely dead; there is still a stinky blind kid left. I'll say he won't live to see tomorrow ..."

Without waiting for him to finish Ke Zhen'E had already pounced toward him. Guo Jing also jumped forward, and despite the fact he moved later, he arrived sooner. Huang Yaoshi launched a single stance, his palms crossed and 'bang!' he shook Guo Jing's body, forcing him to retreat two steps.



Hong Qigong shouted, "I said don't fight! Do you think the Old Beggar's words are just fart?"

Guo Jing did not dare to attack again, his stared angrily at Huang Yaoshi. Hong Qigong asked, "Old Heretic Huang, the Six Freaks of Jiangnan are chivalrous heroes, why did you kill the innocents? The Old Beggar thinks this kind of behavior is not pleasing to the eyes."

Huang Yaoshi said, "I kill whoever I want, why do you care?"

Huang Rong called out, "Father, his five shifus were not killed by you; I know it. Please say that you did not kill them."

Under the moonlight Huang Yaoshi saw his daughter's face was thin and pale, he could not help but feel compassion toward her; but when he turned his eyes toward Guo Jing he saw murder written all over Guo Jing's face, his heart turned hard and he said, "I killed them."

With a choking voice Huang Rong said, "Father, why do you insist on confessing the murder?"

With a loud voice Huang Yaoshi replied, "Everybody says your father is wicked and strange, didn't you know it? Can a criminal do a good deed? All crimes in the world are your father's. The Six Freaks of Jiangnan considered themselves righteous and chivalrous heroes; when I see this kind of self-proclaimed hero I become angry."

Ouyang Feng burst out in laughter and loudly said, "Yao Xiong, your words are right on target. Let Xiong Di [younger brother, referring to himself] toast you!" Lifting up his wine cup he drank it in one go; he said, "Yao Xiong, let me present you a gift." His right hand slightly waved, he threw a cloth bundle away.

He was several 'zhang's apart from Huang Yaoshi, but by a casual wave of the hand the bundle flew like a bullet cutting the air; everyone was astonished and impressed. Huang Yaoshi held out his hand to receive it; the content of the bundle felt like a human head to him. After unwrapping the bundle he found it was indeed a human head, newly beheaded; the head wore a square hat, with beard on its chin, the face was not of someone he knew.

Ouyang Feng said with a laugh, "Xiong Di left for the west this morning and took a rest at a schoolhouse. I heard this rotten scholar taught the students to be loyal ministers and filial sons. Xiong Di loathes hearing such things, so I killed this rotten scholar. You and I are the Eastern Heretic and the Western Poison, we both are of the same kind." Then he let out a long laugh.

Huang Yaoshi's face changed, he said, "All my life I always respect loyal ministers and filial sons." Stooping down he dug a hole with his hand, buried that human's head, and respectfully bowed three times.

Ouyang Feng lost his interest, but he laughed and said, "The Old Heretic Huang has enjoyed a false reputation, turns out he also adheres to propriety and etiquette."

Huang Yaoshi imposingly said, "Loyalty and being filial is integrity, it is not propriety and etiquette!"

He had just closed his mouth when suddenly a thunder crashed. Everybody looked up and saw black clouds covering half of the sky; a thunderstorm was coming. Right at that moment they heard loud music; seven, eight big boats on the lake approached near. The boats were decorated with red lanterns; on the bows stood signs like 'Su Jing' and 'Hui Bi'; looked like they belong to a high ranking government officer.

**End of Chapter 34.**

## Chapter 35 - In the Temple of the Iron Spear

Translated by Frans Soetomo



*Two soldiers were forced to carry Ke Zhen'E as they continued their journey. Huang Rong moved*

*her bamboo stick, constantly whipping them. Towards the evening they arrived at the Temple of the Iron Spear. On the tall pagoda next to the temple crows had made their nests for generations; thousands crows flew back and forth in the air.*

As the boat reached the shore, twenty, thirty people came ashore; among them were Peng Lianhu, Sha Tongtian and their company. The last ones to come ashore were two men, one tall the other short; the tall one was the Great Jin's Prince Zhao, Wanyan Honglie, the short one was the Clan Leader of the Iron Palm Clan, Qiu Qianren. Apparently Wanyan Honglie relied on Ouyang Feng and Qiu Qianren to help them; so he was confident they would win this martial contest, hence he went as far as personally come over to Jiangnan.

Pointing to Qiu Qianren Huang Rong said, "Father, this old man has hit your daughter with his palm that I nearly lost my life."

At the Cloud Village Huang Yaoshi had seen Qiu Qianren's disgraceful act; he did not know it was actually Qiu Qianzhang in disguise. He thought it was strange how with just a little bit of trick this man could injure his daughter.

In the meantime Ouyang Feng was having a discussion with Wanyan Honglie and the others; they were talking in a low voice. After about half a day Ouyang Feng came to Hong Qigong and said, "Qi Xiong, you have said that in the upcoming martial art contest you are not going to help either side, haven't you?"

Hong Qigong said in his heart, "I have the desire but am powerless; even if I want to help I don't have the ability to

do so.” With no other choice he replied, “Contest or no contest, I said the fifteenth of the eighth month.”

“That is so,” Ouyang Feng said, “Yao Xiong, the Quanzhen Sect and the Seven Freaks of Jiangnan are seeking enmity with you; you are a grandmaster and a senior, it will be below your dignity to deal with these people. Let Xiong Di [younger brother, referring to himself] deal with them on your behalf, you can just stand on the side and be the spectator, what do you say?”

Huang Yaoshi thought about the battle situation from both sides’ point of view: if Hong Qigong did not go into action, the Quanzhen Masters would certainly fall under Ouyang Feng’s deadly hand, thus the Quanzhen Sect faced an imminent destruction. If Guo Jing helped them by defending the ‘tian xuan’, Ouyang Feng would not be the Big Dipper Formation’s match; but if this dumb kid kept pestering Huang Yaoshi, the situation would not be the same, he thought, “This kid Guo Jing is still wet behind his ears, the Quanzhen Sect’s life or death, fortune or disaster, actually depends on him. If Wang Chongyang in the underworld knew, all he could do is to laugh bitterly.”

Ouyang Feng saw that he looked indifferent without answering his question, if Zhou Botong arrived, the situation would be detrimental to him; therefore, he let out a long laugh and called out, “Everybody, attack! What are you waiting for?”

Hong Qigong was angry, “Was that a human speaking or a dog farting?”

Ouyang Feng pointed to the sky and said with a smile, “‘Zi shi’ [first hour, midnight, between 11pm and 1 am] has passed, right now it is already early morning of the fifteenth of the eighth month.”

Hong Qigong looked up only to see that the moon had slightly shifted to the west, half of it was still covered by the dark clouds, it was indeed the end of the 'zi shi' and the start of 'chou shi' [second hour, between 1 am and 3 am].

Ouyang Feng's snake staff struck, its target was Qiu Chuji's chest. Facing their archenemy, with Peng Lianhu watching intently on the side, ready to strike, the Quanzhen Six Masters knew that the slightest mistake today would result in their demise; hence they pulled themselves together immediately and fought Ouyang Feng with all their might, but after just a few stances, the six of them groaned inwardly.

This time the Western Poison's intention was to show off his power in front of everybody; everything he displayed was swift and deadly move, particularly the two snakes on the head of his staff, which was extended or withdrawn, striking or evading in sudden movements, it was virtually impossible to guard against. Qiu Chuji, Wang Chuyi and the others had tried several times to stab these snakes, but how could they match their speed?

Huang Rong saw Guo Jing was still staring angrily at her father; it was only because Hong Qigong was on his way that he did not dare to attack. She got a sudden inspiration and said, "All day long talking about avenging his father, humph, now that the killer is here he is afraid."

Her words reminded Guo Jing, he turned his gaze to her and thought, "Kill the Jin dog first, then look for Huang Yaoshi; it won't be too late." Drawing his dagger he charged toward Wanyan Honglie.

Together Sha Tongtian and Peng Lianhu dashed forward, blocking in front of Wanyan Honglie. Guo Jing flicked his wrist and the dagger in his hand stabbed slanting down.

Peng Lianhu blocked with his pair of judge pens, 'clang!' the weapons collided and he felt tingling sensation on his palms. Guo Jing successively went passed two people. Sha Tongtian's 'yi xing huan wei' [altering form changing position] technique was also unable to stop him; hastily Sha Tongtian tried to pursue him. Lingzhi Shangren and Liang Ziweng, each with weapon in their hands positioned themselves to intercept Guo Jing.

Guo Jing flashed sideways to evade two of Liang Ziweng's 'tou gu ding' [bone penetrating nail]; his both hands, one with a dagger the other with a palm, launched 'di yang chu fan' [ram charging fence], throwing his whole body forward.

Liang Ziweng saw that the incoming force was swift and fierce; he rolled away on the ground to evade. Lingzhi Shangren was big and fat, he was not as agile; he thought if he evaded, the enemy would have clear access to the Prince Zhao, so he raised his pair of cymbals, trying to block this attack. With two loud 'Bang! Bang!' his hands were shaken and the two cymbals flew to the air, while the wind from Guo Jing's palm continued hacking toward his face. Relying on the strength of, and poison on, his palms, Lingzhi Shangren fended off Guo Jing's palm, only to feel his chest constricted and his arm sore and numb; his palms hang loosely down, his wrist joints were shaken and to his shock he could not use his poisonous palm skill. He stood dumbly without knowing what to do. If Guo Jing took this opportunity and sent out a palm, he could easily take Lingzhi Shangren's life, but he remembered his main target was Wanyan Honglie, so he did not give Lingzhi Shangren another look.

The pair of copper cymbals flew in the air and glimmering under the moonlight one after another they fell back down to the earth. 'Bang!' the first cymbal landed on Lingzhi



Shangren's head. Luckily it was in a horizontal position; otherwise with its knife-like sharp edge it would chop the Tibetan monk's bald head in two. Another loud 'Bang!' followed, louder and brighter than the first; the second cymbal landed on the first, creating a continuous buzzing noise, which reached far into the lake and echoed back on the surface of the lake.

Wanyan Honglie saw how Guo Jing was able to go through four martial art masters without missing a step and suddenly arrive in front of him, he was unable to restrain his great shock and cried out, "Aiyo!" while turning his body around and run away.

With the dagger in his hand Guo Jing chased him; but he only managed to pursue several steps when suddenly a yellow shadow flashed by, a pair of palms came slanting down on him. Guo Jing stepped aside to evade, while the dagger in his hand stabbed forward; but his body was swayed by the incoming palms; hastily he steadied his step and saw that the enemy was the Clan Leader of the Iron Palm Clan, Qiu Qianren. Guo Jing knew the enemy's martial art skill is superior to his own, so he would not be able to pursue his personal enemy; immediately, with the dagger in his right hand and a bare palm on his left, he focused his attention to fight the enemy.

Peng Lianhu knew the critical situation had passed as he saw Guo Jing was tied down by Qiu Qianren while Liang Ziwen and Sha Tongtian were guarding in front of Wanyan Honglie; he turned his attention to Ke Zhen'E and said with a smile, "Ke Daxia, how come only one freak out of the Seven Freaks of Jiangnan showed up?"

Ke Zhen'E's iron staff was thrown into the Southern Lake by Huang Rong; hearing the enemy's insult he waved his hand to send out an iron caltrop, while he immediately

jumped backward. Under the dim moonlight the iron caltrop looked so swift and powerful. Peng Lianhu had experienced suffering because of this poisonous secret projectile; he was scared like a bird was scared of a bow, he did not dare to fend off with his judge pen, so he hastily pushed the pens on the ground to using it as a brace to help him jump high in the air. With a 'swish' sound the iron caltrop barely missed the bottom of his foot. He noticed Ke Zhen'E did not have any weapon in his hand; clenching his teeth he struck forward with his pens.

Ke Zhen'E was disabled; he usually walked aided by his staff. He heard the wind as the enemy attack arrived, he had no choice but using all his strength he leaped two steps to the side, and almost fell down as his left foot landed on soft earth.

Peng Lianhu was delighted; with his left pen he guarded against Ke Zhen'E, should he be desperate enough to launch an attack to save his own life, while his right pen fiercely smashed down toward Ke Zhen'E's chest.

Ke Zhen'E listened to the sound to distinguish the shape, he rolled away to evade. Peng Lianhu's steel judge pen struck a rock on the ground, sparks flew everywhere. "Blind thief," he cursed, "You are very slippery!" The pen in his left hand also struck.

While he was rolling away, 'swish!' he released another iron caltrop. Lingzhi Shangren was standing nearby, his left hand was holding his right hand, his mouth was busy cursing in Tibetan; as he saw Ke Zhen'E was rolling near him, he raised his foot trying to trample him.

Ke Zhen'E heard the wind; using his left hand to brace the ground he threw himself sideways to escape. But evading the Tibetan monk's foot he could not escape the pair of

judge pen on his back. He felt a stabbing pain and secretly shouted, "Not good!" He closed his eyes, ready to die. Suddenly he heard a tender voice called out, "Off you go!" followed by "Aiyo!" finally he heard a loud 'bang!'

Turned out Huang Rong used the Dog Beating Stick Technique to block the judge pen, turned it around and jerked it up, throwing both the pen and Peng Lianhu away. This stick technique was exactly the same stance Huang Rong used to fling Ke Zhen'E's iron staff away; only Peng Lianhu held his pens tight and would not let them go no matter what, so both Peng Lianhu and his pen fell down together.

Peng Lianhu was shocked and angry at the same time, he crawled back up only to see Huang Rong was using her stick to protect Ke Zhen'E, giving him the opportunity to stand up. "Little witch [Translator's note: the Chinese characters used were 'xiao yao nu', with 'yao' being 'goblin/witch/demon/monster', see also Chapter 25], who asked for your help?"

Ignoring him Huang Rong called out, "Father, look after this blind muddle-head, don't let anybody harm him." While saying that she rushed toward Guo Jing to help him fight Qiu Qianren.

Ke Zhen'E was dumbstruck; he stood motionless not knowing what to do. Peng Lianhu saw Huang Yaoshi was standing quite a distant away, with his back facing them, apparently he did not hear his daughter's call. Quietly Peng Lianhu went behind Ke Zhen'E and suddenly lunged his judge pen toward Ke Zhen'E's back. This move was both swift and violent, so much so that even if Ke Zhen'E still had the iron staff in his hand he would not necessarily be able to block it. Peng Lianhu saw he was about to succeed when suddenly a 'swish' sound was heard; something flew

splitting the air, hit the judge pen, and shattered into dust; turned out it was a small grain of gravel. Peng Lianhu's palm was numb and the judge pen fell to the ground.

Peng Lianhu was shocked; he did not know where the gravel came from, and how could it carry such a tremendous force. He saw Huang Yaoshi with his hands behind his back, still looking at the black clouds on the horizon.

At the Cloud Village Ke Zhen'E had heard this Divine Flicking Finger skill; he knew it was Huang Yaoshi who saved him. In rage he pounced toward Huang Yaoshi's back, while shouting, "Seven brothers and sister only one left, why would I want to live?"

Huang Yaoshi still did not turn his head; he waited until Ke Zhen'E was about three feet away before his left hand lightly waved backward. Ke Zhen'E felt a strong force pushing him back that he fell face up. Quickly he sat down, but felt his blood surging up his chest and he was not able to stand up.

By this time the sky was getting darker, the fog hovering on the surface of the lake was getting thicker, it spilled over to the ground; submerging everybody's legs in it. Guo Jing and Huang Rong managed to fight Qiu Qianren evenly. On the other side, the Quanzhen Sect was in dire circumstances; Hao Datong's thigh was swept by the snake staff, half of Sun Bu'er's Taoist robe was torn. Wang Chuyi was secretly alarmed; he knew that if this fight continued, someone would be either dead or wounded before long. So when Ma Yu and Liu Chuxuan were launching a flank attack, he took a rocket from his pocket. With a hissing sound the rocket flew up to the sky, like a meteor with a long tail in the dark sky.

Actually, all Seven Masters of the Quanzhen Sect had accepted not a few disciples; they formed quite a number of the third generation disciples. Besides Yin Zhiping, there were Li Zhichang, Zhang Zhijing, Wang Zhitan, Qi Zhicheng, Zhang Zhixian, Zhao Zhijing, and the others; they were all outstanding people. In the martial art contest at Misty Rain Tavern in Jiaxing this time, the Seven Masters were afraid that Peng Lianhu, Sha Tongtian and the others would bring their disciples in their attempt to gain victory by sheer numbers; therefore, they also took their disciples along to Jiaxing and told them to wait by the shore of the Southern Lake. As soon as they saw the rocket they were supposed to immediately come and render their assistance. So now recognizing their precarious situation Wang Chuyi released the rocket. Unfortunately the fog was too thick; even separated by several feet it was already difficult to distinguish people, so he was afraid the disciples would not be able to see through this fog.

Later on, after fighting a little while, the white fog was getting heavier, everybody was enveloped inside the thick fog that they suddenly felt alone. The gathering dark clouds in the sky were getting thicker and thicker; the dim moonlight which penetrated these layers of cloud was getting weaker and weaker, until finally it disappeared all together. Everybody was alarmed; although they did not stop fighting, the distance between them were getting farther and farther away, their stances were most of the time defensives and very few offensives.

Guo Jing and Huang Rong were fighting Qiu Qianren together; suddenly the thick fog welled up and shrouded these three people. Guo Jing saw Qiu and Huang two people suddenly disappear, he decided to look for Wanyan Honglie immediately. His eyes were wide open, trying to catch a glimpse of the flashing of the golden crown on Wanyan

Honglie's head. But the fog was very dense; he could not even see anything beyond three feet. He hurried to the east and dashed to the west to seek the enemy, suddenly he heard someone was calling out in the fog, "Zhou Botong is here, who wants to fight with me?"

Guo Jing was ecstatic, he was about to reply but Qiu Chuji beat him, "Zhou Shishu [martial uncle], are you Senior well?"

Right at this moment the dark clouds revealed a gap and suddenly everybody could see their enemies were actually almost within reach of each other, if anybody launched any attack, they would certainly be injured. As if by prior agreement they all cried out in alarm and leaped back.

Zhou Botong was giggling as he stood among these people, he said in a loud voice, "There are so many people here, very lively. Wonderful! Wonderful!" His right hand reached beneath the crook of his left elbow, he rubbed some dirt and rolled it, he said, "I'll give you some poison!" and he shoved the dirt into Sha Tongtian's mouth nearby.

Sha Tongtian quickly evaded, but although he used his 'yi xing huan wei', he was still not fast enough; his left arm was grabbed by Zhou Botong and the dirt was squeezed into his mouth. He had suffered quite a bit under Zhou Botong's hand, he knew if he spat the dirt, he would certainly be beaten; therefore, he had no choice but stay silent and keep the dirt in his mouth. He knew the dirt was not poison, so he certainly was not afraid.

As Wang Chuyi saw Zhou Botong suddenly arrive he was overjoyed, "Shishu," he called out, "Turned out it's true that you are not killed by Huang Daozhu [Island Master]."

"Who said I am dead?" Zhou Botong angrily asked, "The Old Heretic Huang had always wanted to harm me, but it's

been more than ten years and he still has not succeeded yet. Ha, Old Heretic Huang, come and try again.” While saying that he waved his fist toward Huang Yaoshi’s shoulder.

Huang Yaoshi did not dare to ignore him; he counterattacked with a stance from the ‘shen jian luo ying zhang’ [divine sword falling leaves palm] while calling out at the same time, “The mixed-up hairs from Quanzhen Sect blamed me of killing you, they are pestering me without any reason, saying that they were seeking revenge for you.”

Zhou Botong was angry, “You killed me? Are you dreaming? When did you kill me? Look clearly, am I a human or am I a ghost?” While spouting nonsense he fought faster and faster.

Huang Yaoshi knew Zhou Botong would not listen to reason, and he was attacking him out of a whim, but his moves were very exquisite and marvelous; Huang Yaoshi had no choice but fight him with all his might.

The Quanzhen Masters thought that as soon as their Shishu arrived, he would join hands with Huang Yaoshi to fight Ouyang Feng; who would have thought that this Shishu did not want to listen to them but entangled Huang Yaoshi in a close combat instead. “Shishu, don’t fight with Huang Daozhu!” Ma Yu repeatedly called.

Ouyang Feng interjected, “That’s right Old Urchin, you are in no way the Old Heretic’s match; quickly run away to save your life! Quick, quick!”

Listening to this provocation Zhou Botong was all the more not willing to give up. Huang Rong called out, “Old Urchin, you use the martial art from the Nine Yin Manual to fight my father; what would your Shixiong [martial brother] say in the underworld?”

Zhou Botong burst out in laughter, he sounded very smug when he said, "Look carefully, do you see I am using the martial art from the Manual? I have spent a great deal of effort trying to forget the Manual. Hey, hey, learning was easy, forgetting is actually a lot of trouble! What I am using now is the 72-stance Vacant Fist, the Old Urchin's very own creation, do you think it is the same as the Nine Yin Manual even for a fart?"

When fighting him at the Peach Blossom Island, Huang Yaoshi thought his fist and kick strength was much stronger; now he saw that although his fist technique was refined and wonderful, the strength was actually less than he remembered, but Zhou Botong was able to fight evenly with him, which he thought was very strange. Listening to Zhou Botong's words Huang Yaoshi was secretly impressed; regardless of what kind of bizarre technique he employed, Zhou Botong was able to create an excellent martial art all by himself and thus he founded his own martial art school.

From inside the fog Ouyang Feng could indistinctly see the fight between Zhou Botong and Huang Yaoshi; he was inwardly very happy, but was also afraid that as soon as he defeated Huang Yaoshi Zhou Botong would join hands with the Quanzhen Masters and deal with him. Thereupon he thought as he had the opportunity, he should break the Big Dipper Formation first. Immediately he wielded his snake staff and pressed on bit by bit, placing the Big Dipper Formation in more and more dangerous situation.

Wang Chuyi and Liu Chuxuan called out, "Zhou Shishu, kill Ouyang Feng first!"

Zhou Botong saw his martial nephews' desperate situation, with a left palm and a right fist he swept horizontally. When he was very close to Huang Yaoshi's face, suddenly with a



laughter the fist changed into a palm and the palm became a fist, continuing their attack across each other.

Huang Yaoshi had never anticipated this kind of strange move, he hurriedly raised his arms to block, but the tip of his eyebrow was brushed lightly by the edge of Zhou Botong's palm. He was not injured, but Huang Yaoshi felt his eyebrow was burning hot.

As Zhou Botong's palm brushed his opponent suddenly he was shocked; his left hand slapped his own right wrist and he cursed, "Damn it! Damn it! This is the martial art from the Nine Yin Manual!"

Huang Yaoshi was slightly startled; but his palm had already struck with a lightning fast speed, without any noise landed on Zhou Botong's shoulder. Zhou Botong bent his waist and shrunk his shoulder. "Aiyo!" he cried out, "The payback is so quick!"

Meanwhile the fog was getting thicker; it was getting more difficult to see anything. Guo Jing was afraid his two shifus would be injured; he held out his hand to help Ke Zhen'E, pulling his arm toward Hong Qigong. With a low voice he said, "Two Shifus, please take a rest at the Misty Rain Tavern; we'll wait for the fog to recede then we'll talk again." He heard Huang Rong called out, "Old Urchin, are you going to obey me or not?"

"I can't beat your father," Zhou Botong replied, "So don't worry."

"I want you to beat the Old Poison," Huang Rong said, "Just don't kill him."

"Why?" Zhou Botong asked; but his hands and feet were not slowing down.

Huang Rong called out, "If you don't do what I say, I am going to reveal your stinky history."

"What stinky history?" Zhou Botong asked, "You talk nonsense."

"All right," with deliberation Huang Rong said, "Four weaving machines, the weaving of mandarin ducks desiring to fly together right away."

Hearing these two sentences Zhou Botong was so scared that it was as if his soul had left him; "All right, all right, I'll listen to you," he busily said, "Old Poison, where are you?" He heard Ma Yu's voice penetrating the thick fog, "Zhou Shishu, occupy the north polar star to surround him."

Huang Rong said again, "Father, this Qiu Qianren collaborates with a foreign kingdom, he is a big traitor; please kill him quickly."

"Child," Huang Yaoshi said, "Come to my side." In the heavy fog he could not see where Qiu Qianren was. But he heard Zhou Botong was laughing a big laugh while calling out, "Old Poison, quickly kneel down and kowtow to your grandfather; I'll spare your life today."

Guo Jing sent Hong and Ke two people to the side of the tavern; then he turned his body around, trying to find Wanyan Honglie. Who would have thought that as he left the Misty Rain Tavern, not only he could not find Wanyan Honglie, but also Sha Tongtian, Qiu Qianren and the others had all disappeared. He heard Zhou Botong call out, "Uh, where is the Old Poison? Where did he run to?"

This fog was unusually thick, everybody was very close to each other, yet one could not see the face of someone else standing next to them; they only saw a vague image of a human form. Their voices were also somewhat muffled by

the fog, as if there was some layers separating each other. Each one of them was an experienced fighter, yet in this battle they felt like they were blindfolded; not a single one of them was not anxious. Huang Rong was leaning close to her father, Ma Yu was giving out orders in low voice to shrink their circle. Everyone was straining their ears to listen to any enemy's activity; for a moment nobody made any noise. A little while later suddenly Qiu Chuji called out, "Listen! What's that?"

They heard hissing noise all around them, strange noise from a distant coming near. Huang Rong called out in alarm, "The Old Poison dispatches his snakes! Really shameless!"

At the end of the tavern Hong Qigong had also heard the snakes, he loudly called out, "It's the Old Poison's snake formation; everybody quickly come up the stairs!"

Zhou Botong's martial art could be considered number one among those present, but for all his life he was afraid of snakes, so with a loud cry he dashed wildly toward the Misty Rain Tavern. He was afraid the snakes would bite his heel, so he skipped the upstairs room and utilizing his 'qing gong' [lightness kungfu] to the fullest he leaped onto the roof, and sat on the highest ridge, still trembling with fear.

Not too long afterwards the sound of the snakes was getting louder. Huang Rong pulled her father's hand to go up the Misty Rain Tavern. Holding each other's hand the Quanzhen Masters were groping their way upstairs. Yin Zhiping stepped on a crack and fell down real hard that his head grew a swollen lump; quickly he crawled back upstairs.

Huang Rong had not heard Guo Jing's voice, she was concerned; "Jing Gege, where are you?" she called. After

calling out several times she still had not heard any reply; she became anxious and said, "Father, I am going back to look for him."

Suddenly she heard Guo Jing's cold voice, "Why should you look for me? Don't call me; I am not going to answer you." It turned out he was right next to her.

Huang Yaoshi was angry, "Muddle-headed kid, stinky boy," he scolded; his arm swung across sending out a palm. Guo Jing ducked his head to evade; he was just about to launch a counterattack when suddenly 'whiz, whiz' noise of arrows was heard, several long arrows soared in the air and nailed the window lattice.

Everybody was startled; they heard shouts and feathered arrows came one after another. In the darkness nobody knew how many soldiers had arrived; they heard clamoring noise of people outside the building, they were shouting, "Don't let these thieves escape!"

Wang Chuyi was angry, "Looks like the Jin dog colludes with Jiaxing's corrupt government official; they are sending out troops to deal with us!"

Qiu Chuji called out, "Let's go down and completely route them."

"Not good, snake, snake!" Hao Datong shouted. They heard the noise of the arrows getting thicker, while the hissing noise of the snakes getting closer; they realized that Wanyan Honglie and Ouyang Feng had arranged this treacherous plan in advance; only this thick fog was beyond anybody's anticipation, so whether a curse or a luck, it was difficult to say.

Hong Qigong called out, "We can fight the arrows, but cannot fight the snakes; if we evade the snakes, it will be

difficult to keep off the arrows! Everybody quickly withdraw!" They heard Zhou Botong, still shouting abusive words from the top of the roof; he had caught two arrows and used them to fend off the incoming arrows.

Three sides of the Misty Rain Tavern faced the water. The soldiers rode on small boats surrounding the building and showered it with arrows. It was because of the thick fog that they did not dare to press closer to the banks. Hong Qigong called out, "We go to the west, we take the land route." He was the chief of the world's largest clan; each word he said carried a lot of authority and influence. In this chaotic situation everybody accepted his leadership without question; they groped their way back downstairs. They tried hard to open their eyes, but could not see farther than half a foot ahead; how did they know which direction was east, west, south or north? They struck down several arrows while walking in line, holding each other's hand to avoid getting lost. Qiu Chuji and Wang Chuyi led the way with swords in their hands; their swords combined and complemented each other, forming a sword umbrella to keep off the arrow rain.

Guo Jing's right hand was pulling Hong Qigong, while his left hand grabbed someone's hand behind him. He felt this hand was soft, warm and slightly sweaty; turned out it was Huang Rong's small hand. His heart skipped a beat; hastily he let her hand go, only to listen to Huang Rong's cold voice said, "Who needs your concern?" Suddenly he heard Qiu Chuji called out, "Turn around, quick! There are snakes ahead; we can't go through!"

Huang Yaoshi and Ma Yu were at the end of the line blocking the pursuing soldiers; hearing Qiu Chuji's cry they turned their head anxiously. Huang Yaoshi picked a couple of bamboo sticks and swept them outward to strike the snakes. In the fog they heard the hissing sound of the

snakes, and a foul stench attacked their nostrils. Huang Rong could not endure it any longer, with a 'wah!' sound she threw up. Huang Yaoshi sighed and said, "There is no way out, everyone fight for your own life!" Tossing his bamboo sticks aside he carried his daughter in his hands.

Based on everyone's martial art skill, actually the soldiers' arrows would not be able to stop them; but the Western Poison's snake formation was tens of thousands more lethal, as soon as one was bitten, one's life immediately would be gone. Listening to these frightening snakes everybody could not help but feel terrified. Huang Yaoshi's jade flute was broken, Hong Qigong's steel needles were not easy to be launched; the most difficult part was the fog was too thick that nobody could see anything. Even if there were an escape route, nobody knew where to go.

In this critical situation suddenly they heard someone with a cold voice say, "Little witch, give your bamboo stick to this blind man." It was Ke Zhen'E's voice.

Hearing him saying the 'blind man', two characters, Huang Rong immediately understood his intention; she was very happy and without hesitation handed over the Dog Beating Stick to him. Ke Zhen'E maintained his composure; tapping the stick on the ground he said, "Everyone, follow this blind man to safety. There is always fog and mist around the Misty Rain Tavern; what's so strange about it? Otherwise how can it be called the Misty Rain Tavern?" He was a native of Jiaying; ever since he was little all streets and alleys around the Misty Rain Tavern had been ingrained in his heart. Both of his eyes were blind, normally he would be inferior to ordinary man, but now the fog was really thick, black clouds covered the sky; to him it was not the least bit of obstacle.

Listening to the snakes and the arrows he knew that there was an alley to the west with no enemies in that direction. Limping away he immediately led the way. Who would have thought that over the past several years this small alley had been covered with green bamboos, which render it impassable. Ke Zhen'E was very familiar with this road; yet he had not visited this place for decades, so he did not know that this alley had turned into a bamboo grove. He walked only for seven, eight steps and had to stop because the bamboo was on his way. Qiu Chuji and Wang Chuyi again brandished their swords and the bamboo flew out, opening up a passageway where everybody could pass through.

Ma Yu called, "Zhou Shishu, come over here! Where are you?" Zhou Botong was still sitting on the roof; hearing the sound of snakes all around him, how could he dare to reply? He was most afraid that the snakes' favorite food was the Old Urchin's flesh, so if he opened his mouth and let the snakes hear his voice, wouldn't he be finished then?

Walking for dozens of 'zhang's they saw the bamboo grove was getting thin; ahead they could see an alley. The snakes sound was getting farther away, but the soldiers' shouts were actually getting closer; it sounded like some of the soldiers came around to outflank them. This group of warriors was afraid of snakes, they did not even look at ordinary soldiers. Liu Chuxuan said, "Hao Shidi [martial (younger) brother Hao], let us kill some of the dog officers to vent our anger."

"Good!" Hao Datong replied. Two people brandished their swords to block the incoming arrows which came suddenly like locusts.

Walking a little longer they arrived at a bigger road; above them lightning flashed and thunder struck, followed by heavy rain pouring down from the sky. But because of this

downpour the fog cleared up. Although the sky was still covered with dark clouds, they started to be able to see each other's shadow. "Good, good," everybody said, "The thick fog is dispersing."

Ke Zhen'E said, "The danger has passed, everyone can do as they please." Giving the bamboo stick back to Huang Rong he walked to the east without turning his head back.

"Shifu!" Guo Jing called out.

Ke Zhen'E said, "You go and send Hong Laoxia [Old Hero Hong] someplace peaceful and quiet where he can recover from his injury; then come to the Ke Jia Cun [Ke Family Village] to see me."

"Yes," Guo Jing replied.

Huang Yaoshi stretched out his hand to block one incoming arrow, then he went to Ke Zhen'E and said, "I was not willing to explain to you if not for the fact that you saved my life today ..."

Ke Zhen'E did not wait for him to finish, he spat thick phlegm toward the bridge of Huang Yaoshi's nose; he cursed, "Because of what I did today, I won't have any face to see my six brothers and sister!"

Angrily Huang Yaoshi raised his palm. Guo Jing watched this in shock, he flew in trying to rescue; he knew that as soon as this palm struck down, his Da Shifu's life would be gone. But he was more than a dozen steps away from Ke and Huang two people, so he knew he would be too late. Under the dim light of the moon he saw Huang Yaoshi's palm slowly went down. Huang Yaoshi laughed a big laugh and said, "What kind of a man is Huang Yaoshi? How can I lower myself to the same level with you?" With his sleeve he



wiped the phlegm from his face; turning around to Huang Rong he said, "Rong'er, let's go!"

Hearing these words Guo Jing's heart was shaken with doubt; only he was unclear of what had actually stirred his doubt. He only vaguely felt that something was not completely right. It was like something was flashing in his mind, then suddenly it disappeared into a thick fog.

Suddenly he heard an outburst of shouting, a group of soldiers came charging in. The Quanzhen Six Masters with swords in their hands engaged the enemy. Huang Yaoshi felt it was beneath his dignity to fight soldiers, so he turned around to pull Hong Qigong's arm and said, "Qi Xiong, let us two brothers go on ahead and drink some wine; we'll talk about it later."

It was precisely what Hong Qigong had been expecting; he said with a laugh, "Wonderful, just wonderful!" In a moment two people disappeared into the darkness.

Guo Jing wanted to take Ke Zhen'E away, but another group of soldiers came attacking them. Guo Jing did not want to kill too many people, so he pushed his arms forward to open a way. In this confusion he heard Qiu Chuji and the others were fighting a fierce battle; it turned out Wanyan Honglie had dispatched several of his own personal bodyguards among the soldiers, also joining their ranks were a group of valiant Iron Palm Clan people, making them difficult to push back in a short period of time. Guo Jing was afraid his shifu would be injured in this chaotic battle, he shouted, "Da Shifu, Da Shifu, where are you?" By now the battle cry and the clashing of the weapons had merged into one chaotic noise; but all along he did not hear Ke Zhen'E's reply.

After taking the bamboo stick back from Ke Zhen'E's hand Huang Rong had stayed near him all the time. She saw him

spitting her father, her mind was tumultuous. She believed this matter had grown out of proportion; her long life's beautiful dream was shattered into pieces. Hence when the soldiers came she just stood alone, leaning on a tree; when the soldiers galloped quickly past her, it was as if she did neither see nor hear them, she was totally lost in her thought.

Suddenly she heard a call, "Aiyo!" It was Ke Zhen'E's voice. Following the source of the sound she went out to take a look, only to see Ke Zhen'E was laying by the roadside; an officer was holding a saber high above his head, ready to chop it down into Ke Zhen'E's back. Ke Zhen'E rolled away to evade, he sat up and threw a backward fist, hitting the officer squarely that he fainted. Ke Zhen'E was about to stand up when he suddenly fell back down. Huang Rong rushed forward and saw that his leg was hit by an arrow; immediately she pulled his arm and helped him up.

Ke Zhen'E made an effort to shed her hand away, but one of his legs was lame, the other was injured by the arrow; his legs lost their strength that his body staggered, he swayed forward and fell back down. Huang Rong held out her right hand to grab the collar on the back of his neck; she said with a cold laugh, "Still flaunting your heroism?" Her left hand lightly waved, she sealed the 'jian shen xue' [shoulder chaste acupoint] on his right shoulder with a move from 'lan hua fu xue shou' [brushing orchid acupoint technique]. Then she released his collar and grabbed his left arm.

Ke Zhen'E wanted to struggle free, but half of his body was numb; he was unable to move. He had no choice but let her help him up, but his mouth did not stop muttering curses.

Huang Rong let him away for a dozen of steps and took him hiding behind a big tree. They were just catching their breath when another group of soldiers spotted these two

people. A dozen or so arrows came whizzing by. Huang Rong stepped forward and brandished her bamboo stick to protect her head and her face from the arrows; letting the arrows hitting her soft-hedgehog armor.

Ke Zhen'E heard the arrows and knew she was risking her life to save his; his heart softened, he said in a low voice, "You don't need to worry over me, just go save yourself!"

"Hmm," Huang Rong said, "I want to save you; I want you to receive my kindness. What are you going to do about it?"

While they were talking, two people slowly withdrew behind a short wall. The arrows no longer came, but Ke Zhen'E was heavy, Huang Rong was exhausted, her breathing was short; she leaned against the wall to rest. Ke Zhen'E sighed, "It is finished, between you and me gratitude and grudges are over. Off you go, from now on just consider the blind man Ke has died."

With a cold voice Huang Rong said, "Obviously you are not dead, why do you consider yourself dead? You are not seeking revenge against me, I will come looking for you." The bamboo stick in her hand swiftly stretched out and swiftly shrunk back, sealing the 'wei zhong xue' [I don't know how to translate this] on the back of his knees.

Ke Zhen'E was totally caught off guard, he fell sitting down on the ground. Silently he cursed and wondered what kind of malicious method this little demon would use to torture him. His heart was thumping in anger, but he heard her footsteps were getting farther away, it sounded like she was leaving the short wall. By now the battle noise was farther and weaker; apparently the Quanzhen Masters had either killed or driven the soldiers away. Amidst this faraway noise he faintly heard Guo Jing's voice calling out, "Da Shifu!" But the call was going farther and farther away, indicating Guo

Jing was looking for him in the wrong direction. He wanted to call, but because of his injury he could not gather enough strength, he could not even hear his own voice.

A moment later all he could hear was quietness, with roosters started crowing in the distant. Ke Zhen'E mused, "This is the last time I hear the rooster! Tomorrow all across the Jiaying prefecture the roosters will crow again, but I will die under the little demon's hands and won't hear it anymore." Thinking to this point he suddenly heard footsteps; three people came over. The first's footsteps were light, he recognized it to be Huang Rong; the other two were heavy, sounded like they were dragging their feet.

He heard Huang Rong say, "This is Daye [lit. big master], quickly lift him up." While saying that she stretched out her hand to massage his body and unsealed his acupoints.

Ke Zhen'E felt he was lifted up by two people and placed on a bamboo stretcher, and then he was taken away. Ke Zhen'E was flabbergasted; he wanted to ask, but suddenly remembered the last time he said something it backfired to him. While hesitating he heard a 'swish!' sound, the man carrying him on the front cried out in pain, "Aiyo!" It sounded like he ate Huang Rong's stick. He also heard her scolding, "Walk faster! What are you mumbling about? You, the soldiers, are used to bully common people; no one is good!" Then another 'swish!' was heard; the man on the back also ate her stick, but this one did not dare to say anything.

Ke Zhen'E understood, "It turned out she captured two soldiers to carry me up; she is so smart to come up with this idea." By this time the arrow wound on his leg was getting more painful, but he was afraid Huang Rong might mock him, so he bit his lips to prevent any moan from escaping his mouth. He felt his body was jolted up and down, he

knew he was being carried along a rugged pathway. A moment later he felt tree branches and leaves brushing his head and face, so he knew they were walking in the woods. The two soldiers staggered along, they were gasping for breath, but Huang Rong's bamboo stick kept whipping them mercilessly.

About thirty 'li's later Ke Zhen'E estimated that it was already the end of sixth hour [9 - 11am], early seventh hour [11am - 1pm]; the early morning rain had long gone, the sun had dried out half of his wet clothes. He heard the cicadas calling and the dogs barking, a distant sound of men and women singing in the field; it was a perfect picture of peace and tranquility, a totally different world from the vicious battle at the South Lake this morning.

They stopped by a peasant home to take a rest. Huang Rong bought two big pumpkins from the peasant family, she cooked them with rice, and placed a bowl in front of Ke Zhen'E.

"I am not hungry," Ke Zhen'E said.

"Your leg hurts, do you think I don't know?" Huang Rong said, "What hungry or not hungry? I want you to be in so much pain that you will listen to me."

Ke Zhen'E was very angry; using both hands he lifted up the bowl full of hot steaming pumpkin and threw it to her face. Huang Rong laughed coldly, but one of the soldiers called out in pain. Ke Zhen'E knew she must have moved sideways to evade and the bowl of hot pumpkin must have splashed on the soldier's body.

"What?" Huang Rong scolded, "Ke Daye [Big Master Ke] is giving you the pumpkin to eat, you are not happy? Quickly eat them up." That soldier was afraid Huang Rong might beat him again, but also his stomach was very hungry; so

enduring the burning ache on his face he picked the pumpkin up and ate it piece by piece.

This time Ke Zhen'E could not decide whether he should be angry or whether he should laugh; half standing and half sitting he leaned against the bench. He felt very awkward; he wanted to pull out the arrow, but was afraid his blood would spurt out like crazy. She certainly would see someone in danger and not willing to help; most probably she would even mock him.

While he was still hesitating he heard Huang Rong said, "Go get some fresh water, quick!" Her speech was followed by a 'Slap!' apparently she had just slapped one of the soldiers on the ear.

In his heart Ke Zhen'E mused, "This little demon, she is all right as long as she does not say anything; but as soon as she opens her mouth, she makes others suffer."

Huang Rong continued, "Take this knife and cut the clothes around Ke Daye's arrow wound." One of the soldiers complied and did as she said. Huang Rong said, "You, the one with surname Ke, you'd better not cry out in pain; otherwise, your Miss may not pay you any more attention if she is annoyed."

"Who wants your attention anyway?" Ke Zhen'E angrily replied, "Just scram as far as possible." He had not finished his words when suddenly he felt a severe pain on his wound. It seemed to him that Huang Rong had grabbed the shaft of the arrow, and instead of pulling it out, she thrust it into his flesh. Ke Zhen'E was shocked and angry; he was about to throw a punch out when he felt another stab of severe pain and suddenly his palm was holding a shaft of arrow. Turned out Huang Rong had pulled the arrow out and squeezed it into his hand.

Ke Zhen'E heard Huang Rong say, "You move one more time, I am going to slap your ear really good."

Ke Zhen'E knew she was capable of doing what she said she would do. Currently he was not the little demon's match; if she killed him with a blade, then it would be a clean end to his life, but if she ever slapped his face, he would suffer disgrace for the rest of his life, so with a pale face he stayed silent. Hearing some ripping sounds he knew she was tearing several strips of clothes. She wrapped the cloth around his thigh, above and below the wound, tightly to stop the bleeding; and then he felt icy cold water on his wound, apparently she was washing his wound with cold water. He was stupefied, thinking, "If she had evil intention, why did she save me? But if she said she doesn't harbor evil intention, humph, humph, can anything good come out of the Peach Blossom Island's sorcerers, father and daughter? She must have some evil plan for me later on. Ay, these people are so full of craftiness; it is really difficult to guess her real thoughts."

While he was busy with his own thoughts, Huang Rong had already applied some cut wound medicine and wrapped it up properly; he felt his wound was cool and for the most part the pain was gone, but suddenly he heard rumbles from inside his tummy.

Huang Rong coldly said, "I thought you were not hungry, but it turns out you are really starving. Too bad we don't have anything to eat right now. All right, let's go!" With two 'slap, slap' sounds her stick beat the two soldiers, telling those two to lift Ke Zhen'E up and continue their journey.

About thirty, forty 'li's later, the sky was getting dark. They heard the loud cry of crows; hundreds of thousands crows flew back and forth in the air. Hearing these crows Ke Zhen'E knew they were in the vicinity of the 'tie qiang miao'

[Temple of the Iron Spear]. This Temple of the Iron Spear was built to honor a well known general from the Five Dynasties period, the Iron Spear, Wang Yanzhang. Next to the temple there was a tall pagoda. For generations the crows had made their nest on top of this pagoda. There was a legend among the locals that the crows of the Temple of the Iron Spear were the spirits of dead soldiers and generals, so nobody dared to disturb them to such an extent that the crows breed and multiplied, became as many as they were that day.

“Hey,” Huang Rong said, “The sky is getting dark, where can we spend the night?”

Ke Zhen'E thought for a moment, “If we lodge at someone's residence I am afraid they might open their mouths and lead the soldiers to come and arrest us.” So he said, “Not too far from here there is an old temple.”

“What's so interesting about crows?” Huang Rong scolded, “You have never seen one before? Go!” This time Ke Zhen'E did not hear the sound of the stick, nevertheless the two soldiers cried out in pain. He wondered whether she pierced them with her finger or kicked them with her foot.

Not too long afterwards they arrived in front of the Temple of the Iron Spear. Ke Zhen'E heard Huang Rong kick the temple door open. The strong odor of crows' dung and dust assaulted their nostrils. Apparently this temple had been deserted for a long time. He was afraid she would complain of the filth, but surprisingly it seemed like she did not even notice. He heard her ordering the two soldiers to sweep the floor; she also ordered them to go to the kitchen and boil some water. Then he heard she was softly singing a song about some 'pair of mandarin ducks desire to fly together' and some 'not yet old but the hair on the head has turned white.'



A moment later the soldiers brought the hot water over. Huang Rong changed the wrap on Ke Zhen'E's wound first before washing her own face and feet. Ke Zhen'E was lying down on the ground, using the meditation mat as his pillow. Suddenly he heard she spat and said, "Why are you looking at my feet? Do you think my feet are for you to look? I'll dig your eyeballs out!"

That soldier was so scared that his soul almost left him; 'bonk, bonk, bonk' he knocked his head on the ground. Huang Rong asked, "Tell me, why did you look at me washing my feet?"

That soldier did not dare to lie; while still knocking his head he said, "Xiao De [lit. little/lowly one] deserves to die. Xiao De saw Miss' feet are very ... very beautiful ..."

Ke Zhen'E was startled, he thought, "This thief male servant bird's death is imminent, he still has a lewd heart! I wonder if the little demon will pull his muscle out or peel his skin alive." Surprisingly Huang Rong only laughed and said, "A crude and stupid man like you knows what's good and what's ugly?" 'Bang!' the stick in her hand shot out and that soldier rolling around on the ground, but she did not pursue this matter further.

The two soldiers ran to the rear courtyard with their tails between their legs, and did not dare to reappear. Ke Zhen'E stayed still, quietly waiting for what would happen next. He heard Huang Rong pacing back and forth in the main hall; she muttered, "Wang the Iron Spear's prestige shook the world in his era; in the end he was captured and decapitated. How could he flaunt himself as a hero? As some kind of warrior? Hmm, I am afraid this iron spear is not made of real cast iron."

When he was little, Ke Zhen'E, along with Zhu Cong, Han Baoju, Nan Xiren, Zhang Asheng and the others, often came to this temple to play. Although they were kids, every one of them had already had exceptional strength; they took turn brandishing that iron spear to play. When he heard what Huang Rong had just said he opened his mouth, "Of course it is made of real iron; how can it be faked?"

"Hmm," Huang Rong stretched out her hand to pull out the iron spear; she said, "It is about thirty 'jin's [catty; 1 jin = about 0.5kg]. I have lost your iron staff and momentarily can not give you any replacement. Tomorrow we'll bid good-bye; we'll go our own ways. You don't have any weapon with which to defend yourself. Why don't you use this spear as temporary replacement of your iron staff?" Without waiting for Ke Zhen'E to reply she went out and took a large rock from the courtyard; 'bang, bang' she broke the spearhead and handed the pole over to him.

Since his parents and brother died, Ke Zhen'E was inseparable with his six brothers and sister. Right now he did not have any relative left. Although he had been together with Huang Rong for only a day, unconsciously he felt that he hated to part with her; listening to her saying, "Tomorrow we'll bid good-bye; we'll go our own ways' he suddenly felt something was lost. Absent-mindedly he received the iron spear, thinking that this spear was approximately the same size and weight as his lost staff, so definitely he could use this weapon. He also thought, "She gave me this weapon, so she did not have any evil intention."

He heard her saying, "This is the 'tian qi sha dan san' [powdered medicine made of tian qi (lit. field/farm seven) shark's gallbladder] made by my father; it is very beneficial to your wound. You hate us father and daughter; whether you want to use it or not, it's up to you!" She handed the

medicine pouch over to him. Ke Zhen'E held out his hand to receive it, and then slowly put it in his pocket. He wanted to say something, but nothing came out of his mouth. He hoped she would say something else, but she only said, "All right, let's take a rest!"

Ke Zhen'E laid down on his side, with the iron spear by his side; his heart was filled with disquieting thoughts, how could he sleep? He heard the noisy crows on top of the pagoda eventually quiet down until all he could hear was silence everywhere. He did not hear her sleeping, but he heard her tossing and turning; it seemed like she was also restless.

After half a day he heard she was reciting quietly, "Four weaving machines, the weaving of mandarin ducks desires to fly together right away. It's a pity not yet old but the hair on the head has turned white. When the green spring grass ripples in the deepest of dawn's cold; standing face to face taking a bath wearing red clothes."

He heard she repeated the recitation softly, as if she was trying to understand its meaning. Ke Zhen'E did not understand literature, he did not understand what she was reciting, but he could hear the sadness in her voice, as if she was grieving of a heart break; he could not help but feel dazed.

A long time passed. He heard her arrange some meditation mats for her bed; then she lay down and her breathing gradually slowed down, sounded like she was falling asleep. Ke Zhen'E gently stroked the iron spear by his side; all kinds of childhood memories came flooding back into his mind. He saw Zhu Cong with an old book in his hand, reading aloud with his head swaying back and forth. He saw Han Baoju and Quan Jinfa were riding on the idol's shoulders, pulling its beard; Nan Xiren and himself were

pulling one end of the iron spear while Zhang Asheng was pulling the other end; they were playing tug-of-war with each other. At that time Han Xiaoying was only about four, five years old; two lengths of braided hair on her head, giggling and laughing, cheering over them. There were bright red ribbons on her braids, bobbing along as she moved her head. Suddenly everything turned pitch-black. Six sworn brothers and sister, his own brother, and his pair of eyes, everything was successively destroyed under Huang Yaoshi's and his disciples' hands. His heart was burned with hatred, which was very difficult to suppress.

Slowly he raised his iron spear, he quietly walked toward Huang Rong. He heard her gentle and even breathing, she was sleeping soundly. He thought, "Once my iron spear goes down, she will die without feeling anything. Hey, if not, the Old Heretic Huang's martial art is matchless, how can I avenge this deep enmity in this lifetime? His daughter is sleeping right here; the Heaven is granting me a very good opportunity, so that he knows the pain of mourning for his daughter."

But then another thought came into his mind, "This girl has saved my life, how can I repay kindness with evil? (Sigh!) After killing her, I am going to kill myself right next to her to repay today's kindness." Thinking of this, he made up his mind; he thought, "I, Ke Zhen'E, have been an upright man all my life; for decades I have never done anything shameful against the world. Right now I am going to launch a sneak attack toward a sleeping person; it is a cowardly act, but with my death I am going to repay her kindness."

Lifting his iron spear, he was just about to strike Huang Rong's head when suddenly he heard someone was laughing in the distant; the sound was ear-piercing, in the dead of the night it caused the hair on his back stood up on its end.

Huang Rong was awakened by the laughter; she leaped up and saw Ke Zhen'E with the iron spear lifted up, right in front of her. She was so shocked; she called out, "Ouyang Feng!"

Hearing her woke up, Ke Zhen'E could not strike his iron spear anymore; he heard people talking and walking toward the temple. Only they were still quite a distance away that he did not hear clearly what they were talking about. A moment later he started to hear some footsteps; there were about thirty, forty people. Ke Zhen'E was very familiar with this temple with its front hall and rear courtyard; with a low voice he said, "The Old Poison and the others must have seen the crow pagoda and come over here. Let us try to hide from them."

"Yes," Huang Rong said. She kicked the meditation mats to scatter them around the hall.

Ke Zhen'E led her hand toward the rear courtyard; he tried to push the gate, but it was bolted from the outside. "Those two thief soldiers!" he scolded viciously. He guessed those two soldiers were running away in the dark; they were afraid Huang Rong would find out, so they bolted the door in advance.

By now it was too late to strike the gate with his iron spear, since he heard the main gate was pushed open. He knew there was no hiding place in the main hall; he whispered, "Behind the idol."

Two people had barely sat behind the idol when about a dozen people entered the main hall. Ke Zhen'E heard a 'chi' sound, followed by a burst of sulfur smell; he knew someone was lighting the fire. Then he heard Ouyang Feng said, "Zhao Wangye [Prince Zhao; lit. master king], although we

did not get what we want at the Misty Rain Tavern, in the end, we managed to dampen the enemy's spirit."

Wanyan Honglie laughed and said, "This entire battle was under Mister's control."

Ouyang Feng let out some 'heh, heh' laughter, then he said, "Xiao Wangye [Young Prince] arranged an ingenious plan; gathering the soldiers from Jiaxing prefecture, firing out tens of thousands of arrows. We should have been able to round up the whole gang in one swoop; unexpectedly at the right time the thick fog came and gave this group of traitors the opportunity to slip away."

A young voice said, "With Mr. Ouyang and Qiu Bangzhu [clan leader] go into action, although the group of traitors escaped today, they will be annihilated one by one in the future. Only too bad 'wan bei' [junior, younger generation] was one step too late that I could not see Mr. Ouyang greatly unfold his divine power. It was truly a pity."

Ke Zhen'E recognized it was Yang Kang's voice; he could not restrain rage from filling his heart. Then he heard Liang Ziwen, Peng Lianhu, Sha Tongtian and the others uttered flattering words; they praised Ouyang Feng to the utmost, saying how he single-handedly fought the Quanzhen Sect, placing the group of Taoists in an extremely difficult situation, Qiu Qianren was nothing compared to him.

Listening to these many masters gathered together like this, Ke Zhen'E did not dare to breathe out loud. Just now he wanted to end his life together with Huang Rong; but somehow, this time he was afraid to be discovered by the enemy and Huang Rong and he would be killed. He heard Wanyan Honglie's people prepare some bedding and then invite Wanyan Honglie, Ouyang Feng and Yang Kang three people to sleep on them.

Yang Kang heaved a deep sigh and said, "Mr. Ouyang, your nephew's martial art skill was high, his conduct was natural and elegant. Wan bei admired him very much; I hoped to be good friends with him, unexpectedly he was harmed by the Quanzhen Sect's mixed-up hairs. Each time 'wan bei' remembers that, I am always grieved to the utmost. I swear to kill those evil Taoists from Quanzhen Sect one by one with my own hand to console Brother Ouyang's soul in heaven. It's a pity 'wan bei's martial art skill is meager; I truly have the desire but lack the power to do it."

Ouyang Feng was silent for a long time then he slowly said, "My nephew was unfortunate to meet his tragic death. At first I thought he died under Guo Jing's violent hand; but listening to you recount Qiu Chuji's words, I have just found out it was the Quanzhen Sect's group of evil Taoists who did it. Nowadays my White Camel Mountain does not have any heir, let me take you as my disciple."

"Shifu!" Yang Kang loudly called out, "Disciple pays his respect to you." His voice was full of happiness, followed by 'bonk, bonk, bonk' noise as he crawled into Ouyang Feng's presence and kowtowed several times.

Ke Zhen'E thought this person was a good and loyal man's descendant, yet he not only admitted an enemy as his father, but took an evil man as his master as well; he was drowned deeper and deeper. Ke Zhen'E was afraid it would be too difficult for Yang Kang to turn around; he was very angry. He heard Wanyan Honglie say, "In this foreign place we don't have any gift to offer the master, we will do it properly in the future."

Ouyang Feng sighed and said, "Pearls and jewels, the White Camel Mountain also has some. Ouyang Feng simply looks at this child's intelligence; I only wish to have an heir of the martial art I possess."

"Xiao Wang [lit. little king, referring to himself] spoke incorrectly," Wanyan Honglie said, "Mister, please forgive me."

Immediately one by one Liang Ziwen and the others offered their congratulations to these three people. In this clamor suddenly someone was calling out, "Shagu is hungry, I am starving to death; how come nobody is giving me food to eat?"

Ke Zhen'E was greatly surprised to hear Shagu's cry; he wondered how did this girl hang around with Wanyan Honglie, Ouyang Feng and the others? He heard Yang Kang say with a laugh, "That's right, quickly get some refreshments for this Miss to eat; don't let her get ill from starvation."

A moment later Shagu was heard chewing loudly, she was eating. While still chewing she said, "Good Brother, you said you are going to take me home if I listen to what you say; how come we are not home yet?"

"We'll get there tomorrow," Yang Kang replied, "Eat until you are full, then go to bed."

Yet another moment later Shagu suddenly said, "Good Brother, there is some noise in that pagoda, what is that?"

"If not bird, then it must be a mouse," Yang Kang answered.

"I am scared," Shagu said.

Yang Kang laughed, "Sha Guniang [dumb miss], what are you afraid of?" he asked.

"I am scared of ghosts," Shagu replied.

Yang Kang laughed, "We have many people here, ghosts won't dare to come."



"I am scared of that short and fat man's ghost," Shagu said.

Forcing a laugh Yang Kang said, "Don't talk nonsense, what short and fat man?"

"Hmm," Shagu said, "I know, that short and fat man died inside 'popo's [maternal grandmother] grave; popo's ghost will chase that short and fat man's ghost away, she won't let that him stay in the grave. He will come over here to ask retribution from you."

"You talk too much," Yang Kang shouted, "I am going to call your grandfather and he'll come and get you, he'll take you back to the Peach Blossom Island."

Shagu did not dare to say anything anymore. Suddenly Sha Tongtian shouted, "Hey, don't step on my foot! Just sit nicely and don't move!" It seemed that because of her fear of ghosts Shagu had randomly squeezed herself into the crowd.

As Ke Zhen'E heard this exchange, his doubt arose: the short and fat man Shagu mentioned must be his San Shidi [third martial (younger) brother], Han Baoju. He died on the Peach Blossom Island, obviously was killed by Huang Yaoshi; how could his ghost come looking for Yang Kang for retribution? Although Shagu was dumb, there must be a reason behind what she had said earlier. Too bad there were too many powerful enemies in their presence that he could not go out and ask her clearly. He further thought, "In front of the Misty Rain Tavern Huang Yaoshi said to me, 'What kind of a man is Huang Yaoshi? How can I lower myself to the same level with you?' If he did not want to kill me, why did he kill my five brothers and sister? But if it was not Huang Yaoshi, why did Si Di [fourth (younger) brother] said he saw with his own eyes that Huang Yaoshi killed Er

Di [second (younger) brother] and Qi Mei [seventh (younger) sister]?”

He was mulling around these thoughts in his mind when suddenly he felt Huang Rong pull his left hand. With her finger she wrote on his palm one character, ‘qiu’ [ask/request], followed by character after character, ‘...you a favor.’

Ke Zhen'E wrote back on her palm, “What is it?”

Huang Rong wrote, “Tell my father who killed me.”

Ke Zhen'E was startled, he did not understand her intention; he was about to pull her hand to ask further when he felt a breeze right next to him. Huang Rong had leaped out. He heard her said with a smile, “Uncle Ouyang, how are you?”

Nobody had ever expected that someone was hiding behind the idol. ‘Ca, ca, zheng, zheng’ were heard as the people unsheathed their weapons and surrounded her, while shouting, “Who is it?” “Assassin!” “Who are you?”

Huang Rong smiled and said, “My Father told me to wait for Uncle Ouyang here; what are you making such a fuss for?”

“How did your father know I will be here?” Ouyang Feng asked.

Huang Rong replied, “My father knows medicine, divination and astrology, there is nothing he doesn't know. He can do the Wang Xiantian divine calculation and he'd know everything.” [Translator's note: I am not sure about this part]

Nine out of ten Ouyang Feng did not believe her, but he knew even if he asked, she would not tell the truth anyway, so he just smiled and did not say anything. Sha Tongtian

and the others went outside the temple to take a look and did not find anybody else, so they went back in and stood around Wanyan Honglie.

Huang Rong sat on a meditation mat, smiling and chuckling she said, "Uncle Ouyang, you have given my father a hard time!"

Ouyang Feng smiled without answering. He knew that although Huang Rong was young, she was full of tricks. If he gave her one wrong answer, she would grab the opportunity to ridicule him; and in front of all these people he simply could not lose face. Therefore, he waited for her to explain her purpose in coming here before he would decide on the appropriate countermeasure. He heard her said, "Uncle Ouyang, my father is surrounded by the Taoist priests of Quanzhen Sect at the Xincheng town of Xiaopenglai; if you don't rescue him, I am afraid it would be difficult for him to escape."

Ouyang Feng showed a faint smile; "Is that so?" he asked.

Huang Rong anxiously said, "You say it as it is nothing! A real man will take responsibility of his own action; clearly it was you who killed Tan Chuduan from the Quanzhen Sect, but I don't know how it started, those stinky priests are always pestering my father. On top of that, Zhou Botong stirred up the muddy waters; while my father refused to argue with them. What do we do?"

Inwardly Ouyang Feng was delighted; he said, "Your father is a martial art expert; how can those several mixed-up hairs from Quanzhen Sect defeat him?"

"The Quanzhen Sect's ox-nosed plus the Old Urchin, my father is not their match," Huang Rong said, "My father told me to come to you and say that after painstakingly

pondering for seven days and seven nights, finally he understood the meaning of some sentences.”

“What sentences?” Ouyang Feng asked.

Huang Rong said, “Si li xing, ang yi na de. Si re que xu, ha hu wen bo ying.”

To Ke Zhen'E, Wanyan Honglie and the others, these mumbling sentences did not mean anything, but Ouyang Feng was surprised; it was the strange sentence from the last part of the Nine Yin Manual. Could it be that Huang Yaoshi really understood its meaning? His heart was thumping fast, but his face did not show any changes; he indifferently said, “Little girl loves to swindle people. Who can understand those mumbling sentences?”

Huang Rong replied, “Father has translated these strange characters; from top to bottom, clearly. I saw it with my own eyes; how can I swindle you?”

Ouyang Feng knew Huang Yaoshi's ability very well. Originally he thought that if nobody was able to solve these strange characters, then so be it; but if there was anybody who could find the solution, it must be Huang Yaoshi, for nobody else in this world had the same intelligence. Still, with an unenthusiastic voice he said, “Let me congratulate your father, then.”

Huang Rong caught the real meaning behind his words, she knew he was still half believing and half doubting; she continued, “I think I still remember some of what I saw. I don't mind if you want to listen to it.” Immediately she recited, “Either when the body moves, or feels heavy as if pressed by something, or feels light like it is ready to fly, or feels constricted, or feels extraordinarily cold or hot, or feels delightful or restless, or feels like touching something nasty and the hair stood on its end, or feels happy while

drunk; all these things must be channeled through divine passages according to the following method.”

This explanation of the Manual made Ouyang Feng’s heart unbearably itch. Turned out Huang Rong recited the section Reverend Yideng translated from the Nine Yin Manual. All these strange conditions were actually the actual situations anybody who cultivated internal energy would experience; each one of these conditions was enough to intimidate the state of mind that may cause the practitioner to suffer a fire-deviation. If there was a method to channel these conditions through the divine passages; then the method could truly be considered as highly valuable. So what Huang Rong said was indeed from the Manual and not from her own random fabrication. Ouyang Feng’s internal energy was exquisite, naturally he knew whether what he heard was real or fake. His suspicion was gone. “What comes next?” he asked.

Huang Rong said, “I don’t remember the rest, but I vaguely remember something like this: At the time the pores all over the body are empty, right away with careful consideration examine the thirty six matters inside the body; it will be like opening the door to the barn and see various kinds of straw and peas, the heart is pleasantly surprised, and quickly becomes quiet and peaceful.” First she explained the strange conditions from the Manual, and then she described the marvelous method of training; in a way she had divulged the secret method of the Manual. But Ouyang Feng was silent; he thought with her intelligence, it was impossible for her to forget, so she must be deliberately unwilling to tell him; he wondered what her intention really was.

Huang Rong continued, “My father told me to ask Uncle Ouyang: Do you want 5,000 characters, or 3,000 characters?”

“Please explain it to me,” Ouyang Feng said.

Huang Rong said, “If you go and help my father, two people join forces to destroy the Quanzhen Masters. In that case I am going to recite all 5,000 characters of this marvelous ‘jiu yin shen gong’ [Nine Yin Divine Energy] for you.”

Ouyang Feng smiled, “And if I don’t go?” he asked.

Huang Rong replied, “Then Father asked you to avenge him. After you kill Zhou Botong and the Quanzhen Six Masters, I will read the 3,000 characters for you.”

Ouyang Feng smiled and said, “Your father and I are just casual acquaintances, how come he suddenly places so much respect toward the Old Poison?”

Huang Rong said, “My father said that: First, the killer of your nephew is a Quanzhen Sect’s disciple, so he supposed you will want to seek revenge ...”

Listening to this part Yang Kang could not help but shiver; he was Qiu Chuji’s disciple, so with her words Huang Rong obviously meant him. Shagu was standing right next to him, she asked, “Good Brother, are you cold?” Yang Kang mumbled his reply.

Huang Rong continued, “Second, after translating the Manual, he was challenged into battle by the Quanzhen priests; he did not have time to explain everything to me. Thinking that this matchlessly wonderful book is difficult to find, how can he let it be lost with his demise? Nowadays you are the only one who has similar personality with him. He remembered Uncle Ouyang went to the Peach Blossom Island to seek a marriage alliance. Although your nephew was unfortunate to fall under the Quanzhen Sect’s disciple, my father said you should not thinking about him too much;

therefore, he wanted you to train this 'shen gong' [divine power/energy] and teach it to me later on."

Ouyang Feng felt a pang of pain in his heart; but he thought, "What she said was reasonable; if there is no direction from an expert, although this little girl memorized the Manual in its entirety it will still be useless." But then something else came into his mind, he said, "How do I know you will tell me the real Manual or a fake one?"

Huang Rong replied, "Guo Jing, that muddle-head has written the Manual for you; as I read the crucial points from the translation, you check it against your copy, then you'll know whether it is real or fake."

Ouyang Feng said, "You are right. Let me think about it; we'll leave in the morning to rescue your father."

Huang Rong anxiously said, "Helping people is like fighting fire, how can we wait till tomorrow?"

Ouyang Feng said with a laugh, "Then I will avenge your father; won't that be the same?" He had made a decision that as the Manual had already been in his hand, later on he could compel Huang Rong to recite to him the crucial points; and then he could think it over to understand the meaning. For now, let Huang Yaoshi and the Quanzhen Sect fight each other. Hopefully both sides would hurt each other; wouldn't that be great?

Hiding behind the idol Ke Zhen'E was listening to two people conversing about the Nine Yin Manual; he wondered why Huang Rong wrote on his palm 'Tell my father who killed me,' seven characters [the original Chinese was 'gao wo fu he ren sha wo,' 7 characters]; he did not understand her intention. He heard Huang Rong say, "Then we will leave early in the morning tomorrow, is that all right?"

"Absolutely," Ouyang Feng said with a smile, "Now you go take a rest!"

Ke Zhen'E heard Huang Rong drag a meditation mat over to sit nearby Shagu. "Shagu," she said, "Yeye [lit. paternal grandfather] took you to the Peach Blossom Island, how come you are here?"

"I don't want to follow Yeye, I want to go home," Shagu said.

"This good brother surnamed Yang; didn't he come to the island and took you on his boat, and come over here together?" Huang Rong asked.

"That's right," Shagu said, "He treats me really good."

Ke Zhen'E's heart was stirred, "When did Yang Kang come to the Peach Blossom Island?" He heard Huang Rong asked again, "Where did Yeye go?"

Shagu was startled, "Don't tell him I am running away," she said, "Yeye will beat me."

Huang Rong smiled, "I won't tell him, but whatever I ask you, you must answer me nicely."

"You must not tell Yeye," Shagu said, "He wants to take me back and teach me to write."

Huang Rong laughed, "I certainly won't tell him," she said, "Did you say Yeye wanted to teach you to write?"

"That's right," Shagu said, "That day Yeye took me to his study room and taught me to write; he said my father's surname was Qu Qu-something, so my surname is also Qu Qu-something. He wrote the Qu Qu-something character and told me to remember. He also told me my father's name was Qu Qu-something, something Feng. I could not



remember the name. Yeye got angry and scolded me that I am very dumb. I AM called Shagu [sha - dumb, gu - paternal aunt, see also my note in Chapter 23]!”

Huang Rong laughed, “Shagu is naturally dumb. Yeye scolded you, Yeye is bad, Shagu is good!” Shagu was very happy to hear that. “And then what happened?” Huang Rong asked.

Shagu said, “I said I want to go home, Yeye was even angrier. Suddenly a deaf and mute servant came, his finger pointing to the east and to the west, his mouth uttered ‘yi yi ah ah’. Yeye said, ‘I don’t want to receive any guest; tell them to go back!’ A moment later that mute servant came back with a piece of paper in his hand. Yeye took a look and then put it down on the table. He told me to go with the mute servant to receive the guest. Ha, ha, that short and fat man was so ugly! I stared at him and he stared back at me.”

Ke Zhen’E remembered that when they visited the Peach Blossom Island to seek audience, it was exactly like Shagu had just said; at first Huang Yaoshi did not want to see the six of them, then Zhu Cong wrote a letter to be delivered, afterwards Shagu came out to receive them. But the Third Brother was no longer alive; he could not help but feel grief in his heart.

He heard Huang Rong ask again, “Did Yeye see them?”

Shagu said, “Yeye told me to accompany the guests to eat, but he went out. I don’t like to see that short and fat man, so I slipped away and went out. I saw Yeye was sitting behind a rock, looking out at the ocean. I also looked at the ocean. I saw a boat in the distant coming toward the island. On the boat there were some Taoist priests.”

Ke Zhen’E thought, “That day we heard the Quanzhen Sect was going to go to the Peach Blossom Island to seek

revenge; so we went ahead of them to inform Huang Yaoshi to temporarily keep himself away from them, and wait for the Six Freaks of Jiangnan to explain the whole story to the Quanzhen Sect. But all along we have never seen the Quanzhen Masters on the Island, why did this Shagu said that there were Taoist priests came in by boat?"

He heard Huang Rong asked, "Then what did Yeye do?"

Shagu replied, "Yeye beckoned me to come over. I jumped in fright; turned out he had already seen me slipping out to play. I did not dare to come over, I was afraid he would hit me. He said "I won't hit you, you come over here". So I went over. He said he wanted to take a boat ride and go fishing, he told me to wait for the Taoist priests and to let them in as soon as they came ashore; he told me to let them eat together with the short and fat man six people. I said I wanted to go fishing too. Yeye said I could not come; I had to wait for the Taoist priests and let them in, because they did not know the way on the Island."

"And then what happened?" Huang Rong asked.

Shagu said, "And then Yeye went beyond the big rock and set sail. I know, these Taoist priests are ugly, Yeye did not want to meet them."

Huang Rong praised her, "That's right, what you said is totally correct. When did Yeye come back?"

"Come back?" Shagu said, "He did not come back."

Ke Zhen'E was shaken; he heard Huang Rong ask, "Are you sure? Then what happened?" He could hear her voice was slightly trembling; apparently she also realized this was a crucial point.

Shagu replied, "Yeye was about to set sail, suddenly a pair of big birds came flying by; they were your birds. Yeye beckoned and whistled toward the birds, this pair of birds came down. There was something tied on the bird's foot, it looked so amusing. I shouted, 'Yeye, give it to me, give it to me!' ..." Speaking to this point she actually shouted loudly.

Yang Kang chided her, "Quiet! Everybody is trying to sleep."

"Shagu," Huang Rong said, "Just continue your story."

Shagu said, "I will speak quietly." And she indeed lowered her voice, "Yeye ignored me; he ripped a cloth from his robe and tied it up on the big bird's foot, then he let them go."

"Hmm," Huang Rong talked to herself, "Father was going to avoid the Quanzhen Masters, no wonder he did not have time to fetch the 'jin wawa' [see Chapter 29]. But who shot the female eagle with an arrow?" So she asked, "Who shot an arrow to the bird?"

"Arrow? There was no arrow," Shagu said; and then she went silent like she was lost in thought.

"All right," Huang Rong said, "Why don't you continue?"

Shagu continued, "Yeye saw his robe was torn, he took it off and told me to go and get another one for him. But when I came back Yeye was gone, the Taoist priests' boat was also gone, I only saw that torn robe lying on the ground."

Listening to her to this point Huang Rong no longer asked; she silently mulled it over in her head. Half a day later she said, "Where did they go?"

"I saw them," Shagu said, "I called Yeye, but he did not reply. I climbed to the top of a big tree and looked, I saw Yeye's little boat in front, the Taoist priests' big boat

followed behind, slowly they sailed on the ocean and disappeared. I don't like to see that short and fat man, I stayed on the beach, kicking the gravel and playing all day until dark, and came back with this Yeye and this good brother."

"So it was this Yeye, and not the one who taught you to write?" Huang Rong asked.

Shagu giggled and said, "This Yeye is good, not only he did not want to teach me to write, he even gave me a piece of cake."

"Uncle Ouyang," Huang Rong said, "Do you still have the cake? Can you give her some more?"

Ouyang Feng dryly laughed, "I do."

Ke Zhen'E felt as if his heart was jumping out his throat, "Turned out Ouyang Feng was on the Island that day," he thought.

"Aiyo!" suddenly he heard Shagu cry out, followed by 'slap, slap' two times, some people were fighting, and then someone leaped back and landed again. He heard Huang Rong call out, "You want to kill her to close her mouth?"

Ouyang Feng laughed, "This matter might be hidden from other people, but certainly won't be hidden from your father. Why would I want to kill this dumb girl? If you want to ask, then just ask her." But Shagu was moaning and groaning and could not talk anymore. Ke Zhen'E wondered which part of her was hit by Ouyang Feng.

"I don't have to ask," Huang Rong said, "I've already guessed correctly; I only want Shagu to say it with her own mouth."

Ouyang Feng laughed and said, "This little girl is really smart. How did you guess? Why don't you tell me?"

Huang Rong said, "When I first saw the situation of the Island, I also thought that Father had killed the Five Freaks of Jiangnan. But then I remembered something, and I knew it must not be him. Just think, how can my father leave these stinky male corpses in my mother's grave to accompany her? How can he leave the grave without closing the door?"

"Aiyo," Ouyang Feng slapped his thigh, "We really overlooked that. Kang'er, isn't that so?"

Hearing this Ke Zhen'E felt his chest was about to burst open; only now did he realize that Huang Rong had early on known that the killers were Ouyang Feng and Yang Kang, two people. The reason she suddenly went out and sacrificed her own life was to reveal the truth and clear up her father from being wrongly accused. She knew perfectly well that when she went out, most likely she would be unfortunate rather than fortunate; that was why she asked Ke Zhen'E to tell her father who killed her. Ke Zhen'E was filled with grief and regret, he said in his heart, "Good Miss, it would be enough if you just told me who the killer is; why do you deliver your life in vain?" But then he thought, "I, the 'fei tian bian fu' [Flying Bat, lit. bat flying to the sky], am so hot-tempered. I am blind, yet I placed the blame on father and daughter. Even if she told me clearly, would I believe her? Ke Zhen'E, oh, Ke Zhen'E, you stinky blind man, you deserve to be killed with a thousand blades; you have forced this good Miss' death."

In his regret he wanted to lift his hand and fiercely slap his own ear, but he heard Ouyang Feng said, "How did you guess it was me?"

Huang Rong said, "Is it difficult? In this present age, those who are able to strike the yellow horse and to break the balance beam are not many. But at first I was thinking of a different person. At the point of his death Nan Xiren had written several characters with his finger on the ground, 'My killer is ten'; he died before the fifth character [translator's note: the original Chinese text was 'sha wo zhe nai shi'] was finished. I thought your name does not start with a 'ten' (十), so I thought it was the character 'Qiu' (仇) from Qiu Qianren."

Ouyang Feng laughed out loud, he said, "This man Nan Xiren was truly a die hard; unexpectedly he survived and saw you."

Huang Rong said, "I saw his condition before his death, I was sure he was hit by a strange poison; I thought Qiu Qianren practiced poisonous palm skill, that's why I guessed it was him."

Ouyang Feng said with a smile, "Qiu Qianren's martial art is based on palm strength and not poisonous palm. His palms do not have any poison on them. He used boiling poison to train his palms, but it is merely palm strength's training method. He forced the poison gas to come out, henceforth his palm strength increased. When he died, that Nan Xiren opened his mouth, but could not say anything, his face showed a smiling expression, is that right?"

"That's right," Huang Rong said, "What kind of poison is that?"

Ouyang Feng did not answer, he asked again, "His body was twisted, he was rolling around on the ground, he suddenly possessed unusually great strength, is that right?"

"That's right," Huang Rong said, "This violent poison, I thought other than the Iron Palm Clan, nobody in the world

can possibly have it.”

It was obvious that Huang Rong said that to provoke Ouyang Feng, and he knew it very well, but he still could not restrain from being agitated and angry, “Do you think people call me the Old Poison for nothing?” He stomped his snake staff heavily on the ground and shouted, “The snake on this staff bit him on his tongue, that’s why there was no wound on his body, but he could not speak.”

Hearing this Ke Zhen’E felt warm blood bubbling up straight to his brain, he almost fainted several times. Huang Rong heard movement from behind the idol, she let out some coughs, trying to cover up the noise, and then slowly said, “The Five Freaks of Jiangnan died under your hands, Ke Zhen’E who escaped does not have eyes to see, in the end nobody knew the real killer.”

Listening to her Ke Zhen’E’s heart was stirred, “She is saying that to remind me, telling me not to act rashly so that the two of us will not lose our lives and die without explanation.” He heard Ouyang Feng laugh dryly, “How can that stinky blind man escape my palm? I deliberately let him go.”

“Ah, right,” Huang Rong said, “You killed five people, and let him believe it was my father who killed them. He would go and publicize this matter, then rally the heroes of the world to attack my father.”

Ouyang Feng said with a smile, “It was actually not my idea, but Kang’er’s; isn’t that right?” Yang Kang mumbled his reply.

Huang Rong said, “It is truly a divine and marvelous strategy. My utmost admiration!”

Ouyang Feng said, "You changed the topic; what made you think of me?"

Huang Rong replied, "I thought Qiu Qianren and I fought at the southern road between Hunan and Hubei; even though it is possible for him to overtake us and arrive at the Peach Blossom Island ahead of us, it was actually very difficult with us riding the little red horse. I thought again about what Zhu Cong wrote at the back of the letter, he called everybody to stay on their guard. The last character was not finished, he only made three strokes: one horizontal line, one vertical, and another horizontal like a hook. It could be the start of 'east' ( 东 ) character, or it could be 'west' ( 西 ) character, couldn't it? If not 'Eastern Heretic' then it must be 'Western Poison'. I have thought about this on the Peach Blossom Island; but there are some details I do not understand yet."

Ouyang Feng sighed, "I thought I have done everything flawlessly, who would have thought there are so many trails I left behind. That dirty scholar was so quick, I did not even see him moving his pen to write anything."

"He was known as the Magic Hand Scholar," Huang Rong said, "Naturally he would not let you see whatever he was doing. I pondered deeply over the character 'ten' ( 十 ) Nan Xiren wrote; I wonder what could it be? It was because I thought this Xiao Wangye's [young prince, lit. young master king] martial art skill is so low that definitely he did not have the ability to kill the Five Freaks of Jiangnan in one stroke, therefore, I have never suspected him."

"Humph," Yang Kang snorted.

Huang Rong continued, "That day I was all alone on the Peach Blossom Island, tossing and turning between being asleep and awake; I could not find the right conclusion. I



was dreaming of many, many people, I dreamt about Mu Jiejie [elder sister Mu], I dreamt she was in Beijing, during the joust to find a spouse. I suddenly was awakened from the dream, sprang up, and only then did I know the killer was actually this Xiao Wangye!”

Hearing Huang Rong saying these words with sharp voice Yang Kang was drenched in cold sweats; forcing a laugh he said, “Did Mu Nianci tell you in a dream?”

“That’s right,” Huang Rong said, “If not for this dream, how could I guess it was you? Where is that little emerald shoe of yours?”

Yang Kang was startled, with a stern voice he asked, “How did you know? Did Mu Nianci also tell you in a dream?”

With a cold smile Huang Rong said, “Do you think I need it? After you two killed Zhu Cong, you stuffed the treasures inside my mother’s grave in his pocket; so that when other people see it, they would think he robbed the treasures and was found out by my father; thus he lost his life. Framing someone like this is actually a clever idea; only you forgot one thing: Zhu Cong was known as the Magic Hand Scholar.”

Ouyang Feng’s curiosity arose, “What about the Magic Hand Scholar?” he asked.

“Humph,” Huang Rong sneered, “He only knows putting treasures on other, he actually did not know that other took a treasure from his body.”

Ouyang Feng did not understand, “What treasure?” he asked.

Huang Rong said, “Although Zhu Cong’s martial art skill was inferior to you, at the point of his death again he

displayed his magic hand skill; he took something from this Xiao Wangye and grasped it in his hand, of course you did not know. If not because of this thing, not in a million years would I expect this Xiao Wangye to pay a visit on the Peach Blossom Island."

Ouyang Feng said with a smile, "This matter becomes more and more interesting; this Magic Hand Scholar was actually highly skilled, his life had already gone yet he was still able to leave you a clue. The thing he took must be that little emerald shoe you were talking about."

"That's right," Huang Rong said, "I have seen all the treasures inside Mother's grave since I was little; and I have never seen this little emerald shoe before. Even in his death Zhu Cong still grasped this shoe tightly; there must be a reason behind it. The front of this shoe has a 'bi' [contest, compete] character on it, while on the opposite side there was a 'zhao' [to recruit] character. I painstakingly thought about this, but all along could not penetrate the mystery. That night I had a dream, I saw Mu Jiejie on a street corner in Beijing showing off her martial art skill. There was an embroidered banner stood on the side, with the word 'bi wu zhao qin' [Joust to find a spouse - lit. martial art contest to recruit a relative/person with intimate relation] on it. Suddenly it dawned on me and everything clicked together."

Ouyang Feng laughed and said, "Turned out these two characters on the shoe have this romantic history! Ha, ha, ha, ha!" He laughed happily, but actually Ke Zhen'E was listening in indignation, since he did not understand what it was that dawned on Huang Rong's mind.

Huang Rong knew Ke Zhen'E did not understand, so with the pretense of talking to Ouyang Feng, she explained clearly, "That day in Beijing Mu Jiejie was jousting for a

spouse, Xiao Wangye happened to display his full capability. Lucky for me I was there in the crowd to witness this lively occasion. After contesting for a while, Xiao Wangye snatched Mu Jiejie's embroidered shoe. He won the martial art contest, so he should marry her, but actually there were many complicated affairs involved."

This joust to find a spouse did indeed have too many repercussions later on. At that time Liang Ziweng, Sha Tongtian and the others were also present to be the witnesses: Wanyan Honglie mourned his wife, Yang Kang met his biological father, and all kinds of circumstances surrounding it. Listening to this point everybody's heart was filled with sadness and regret.

Huang Rong said, "After I remembered this, I was able to figure out what had happened. Xiao Wangye and Mu Jiejie privately agreed to spend their lives together in the future; naturally they decided the engraved jade shoes would make the best token of engagement. This pair of jade shoes complement each other; one has the 'bi' and 'zhao' two characters, the other must have the 'wu' [martial art] and 'qin' [relative/person with intimate relation] on it. Xiao Wangye, did I guess correctly?" Yang Kang did not answer.

Huang Rong continued, "Once I figured this thing out, the rest was easy. Han Baoju was killed by the 'jiu yin bai gu zhua' [Nine Yin White Bone Claw]. In this world only 'hei feng shuang sha' [the Twin Killers of the Dark Wind] practiced this martial art; but these two had already died. Others would certainly think that the Twin Killers of the Dark Wind's shifu must be also proficient in this skill. Who would have thought that my father had never practiced this Nine Yin White Bone Claw or any skill similar to this martial art; yet the Copper Corpse Mei Chaofeng had received a skilled disciple when she was still alive. Therefore, the tiny 'ten' character Nan Xiren wrote must be the start of 'yang'

( 黄 ) character. Unexpectedly that muddle-head kid Guo Jing insisted it was the 'huang' ( 黄 ) character." Speaking to this point Huang Rong could not help feeling gloomy.

Ouyang Feng let out a long laugh and said, "No wonder that Guo Jing kid disregarded his own life attacking your father at the Misty Rain Tavern."

Huang Rong sighed, "Your trick was really marvelous; in his anger that muddle-head kid could not distinguish right from wrong. At first I thought you captured one of the deaf and mute servants and forced him to show you the way; only today did I realize it was Shagu who let you in. Xiao Wangye must have promised to take her back to the Ox Village; Shagu was so happy and did whatever you told her to do. Hmm, you two must have set up an ambush inside my mother's grave; then you told Shagu to invite the Six Freaks of Jiangnan in my father's name, telling them to come into the grave. With Uncle Ouyang blocking the grave entrance, how could the Six Freaks of Jiangnan escape your cruel hands? It was truly capturing the turtle inside an earthen jar."

Listening to her Ke Zhen'E got the impression that she was there to witness everything; the feeling when that day they fought powerful enemy in the tomb came back to his mind. He heard Huang Rong continue, "Uncle Ouyang had seen my father's long robe on the shore; he took and wore it. The light inside the grave room was dim, in a flash several of the Six Freaks were injured or killed, how could the rest of them recognize the enemy in that desperate situation? So Nan Xiren told Ke Zhen'E that the killer was my father. Zhu Cong and Quan Jinfa were killed by Uncle Ouyang; Han Baoju was killed by Xiao Wangye while Han Xiaoying cut her own throat. Ke and Nan two people managed to escape from the grave, and fought furiously in the study room. You deliberately let Ke Zhen'E escape. By the time Nan Xiren

recognized the killer to be the one surnamed Yang, he had already been bitten by the snake.”

Ouyang Feng sighed, “This little girl has a god-like analytical ability. All these things happened by chance; it was the Six Freaks’ fate that they should die this way. When I went to the Peach Blossom Island with Kang’er, we did not know the Six Freaks of Jiangnan would be there.”

“That’s true,” Huang Rong said, “Although the Six Freaks of Jiangnan enjoyed sound reputation in the Jianghu, it was because of their ‘xia yi’ [chivalry], two characters. If we are talking about martial art skill, Uncle Ouyang would not even look at them. So if you two went through great length executing your scheme, you must have another big plan in your mind.”

Ouyang Feng smiled and said, “Little girl is very smart; you must have guessed correctly.”

Huang Rong said, “Indeed I have; but I ask Uncle Ouyang’s forgiveness if it is incorrect. I believe your initial intention was to see the Quanzhen Masters and my father fight each other and injure each other, and then just like Bian Zhuang stabbing the tiger you would destroy both Quanzhen Sect and the Peach Blossom Island in one fell swoop. Who would have thought that you were one step too late; my father and the Taoist priests of Quanzhen Sect have already left the Island. Xiao Wangye interrogated Shagu, and found out that the Six Freaks of Jiangnan were there. Mmm, thereupon you two fully displaying your capabilities by killing the Five Freaks, and arranged it so that all blames will fall to my father. You killed all the deaf and mute servants on the Island, and burned their bodies down to leave no trace; hence there would be no evidence at all. Later on when this matter is known, how can Hong Qigong, Emperor Duan and the others not make things difficult for my father? Xiao

Wangye was afraid my father would return early and erase all sorts of traces you left behind on the Peach Blossom Island; therefore, you intentionally let Ke Zhen'E escape. This man is blind, but his tongue is not rotten yet. It's true that he cannot see, but he can say all kinds of nonsense."

Listening to this Ke Zhen'E could not help but feeling grieved and angry, but also ashamed. He heard Ouyang Feng sigh and say, "I really envy the Old Heretic Huang to have such a good daughter. Everything that happened was really very complicated, but you guessed everything correctly, as if you have seen everything with your own eyes. Little baby doll, you are really smart."

**End of Chapter 35.**

## Chapter 36 - Expedition to the West

Translated by Frans Soetomo, with special thanks to Mr. Jamin Soetomo



*Ke Zhen'E moved his spear to attack the incoming hand. Ouyang Feng raised his arm a little and Ke*

*Zhen'E's arms were numb and he felt pressure on his chest. His spear flew upward, making a hole in the ceiling and landing on the temple's roof.*

Huang Rong quietly said, "I appreciate Uncle Ouyang's compliments to me. Too bad Guo Jing is so gullible that right now he doesn't even want to live in the same world as my father and I. After you save my father, if your nephew were still alive, ay! Couldn't the marriage proposal of the past be pursued further?"

Ouyang Feng's heart was stirred, "What is she getting at by bringing this matter up?" he pondered. In the meantime, Huang Rong continued, "Shagu, this good brother is very nice to you, isn't he?"

"Yes," Shagu answered, "He is going to take me home. I don't want to play on that island anymore, I want to go home."

"What are you going to do at home?" Huang Rong asked, "There is a dead man in your house; there is a ghost there."

"Ah!" Shagu cried, she was scared, "Ah! There is a ghost in my house, a ghost! I don't want to go home."

"Who killed that man?" Huang Rong asked.

"I saw it, it was this good brother ..." Shagu answered, but before she finished, 'bing! bing!' a couple of metallic sounds were heard, two secret projectiles fell down on the ground.

Huang Rong laughed, "Xiao Wangye [Young Prince], you don't want her to talk? Fine. Just don't use secret projectiles to hurt her."



Yang Kang was indignant, "This idiot talked nonsense, with ghost and everything."

"Shagu," Huang Rong said, "You can keep talking. This nice Yeye [grandpa] loved to hear your story."

"No," Shagu answered, "Good brother doesn't want Shagu to talk, Shagu won't talk."

"That's right," Yang Kang said, "Go lie down and sleep. If you open your mouth for just one more word, I'll have the ghost come over and eat you."

Shagu was very scared, "Oh, Oh," she said. Then Ke Zhen'E heard some rustling sound. It was Shagu's clothes, she lied down and slept.

"Shagu," Huang Rong said, "If you don't want to talk to me, I'll get Yeye to take you back to the Island."

"I don't want to go, I don't want to go," Shagu screamed.

"Then you'll have to talk," Huang Rong said, "This good brother has killed someone in your house; what kind of man has he killed?" Everybody felt strange on why she suddenly wanted to talk about Yang Kang killing a man.

Yang Kang's heart was thumping loudly, he got his right hand ready; as soon as Shagu revealed his secret about him killing someone at the Ox Village, even if it would arouse Ouyang Feng's suspicion, he would use the 'Nine Yin White-bone Claw' to kill Shagu. He was wondering in his heart at the same time, "When I killed Ouyang Ke, only Mu Nianci, Cheng Yaojia and Lu Guanying, three people saw it. Did any one of them leak the secret? Hmm, it is likely that Shagu was also there to witness it, I was not being careful."

The temple was quiet and everybody was waiting for Shagu to open her mouth. Ke Zhen'E could feel the tension, but he

did not dare to make a slightest move. After waiting for half a day Shagu still did not say anything, only her light snore was heard; apparently she had fallen asleep.

Yang Kang breathed out a sigh of relief; his palm was sweating cold, "This Shagu poses a great danger to me," he thought, "I must think of a way to get rid of her." He cast his glance toward Ouyang Feng who was sitting quietly with his eyes closed. The moon illuminated the side of his face. He looked indifferent, seemed like he was unconcerned of everything that was going on around him.

Everybody else thought Huang Rong was just talking nonsense. Shagu was asleep; looked like the case was closed. They started to lie down or sat leaning against the wall, trying to get some sleep.

Just when the moon was rising higher they heard Shagu's startled voice. She jumped up and shouted, "Don't hurt me! Ouch, it hurt!"

With shrilling voice Huang Rong cried, "Ghost! Ghost! It's a ghost without legs! Shagu, you killed that young mister without legs; he is coming to get you!"

In the quietness of the night Huang Rong's voice made the hair on everybody's back rose up.

"No!" Shagu cried, "It wasn't me! It was this good brother ..." she had not finished when suddenly 'Ah!' 'Bang!' 'Aiyo!' were heard simultaneously. Yang Kang abruptly sprang up, his arms outstretched, his fingers forming a claw heading straight toward Shagu's skull, but Huang Rong had used her dog-beating stick to entangle his legs.

The temple was in chaos; Sha Tongtian and the others immediately surrounded Huang Rong. Huang Rong, however, seemed oblivious to all this, her left index finger

pointed toward the temple's door; she cried out, "Mister with no legs, come here, Shagu is here!"

Shagu looked at the temple door. It was dark, so all she could see was blackness, but she was always scared of ghosts ever since she was little; quickly she pulled Huang Rong's sleeve and cried in panic, "Don't come to take my life, it was this good brother who killed you with an iron spearhead. I was in the kitchen watching through the door ... ghost with no legs, don't come looking for me!"

Not in a million years would Ouyang Feng guess that his beloved nephew was killed by Yang Kang; yet he always thought that Yang Kang was unable to tell lies. Obviously Shagu could not lie.

Sad and angry he laughed maniacally, casting a sharp glance toward Yang Kang. "Xiao Wangye, my nephew deserved to die. It's good that you killed him, it's good!" he said. His laughter sent a chill on everybody's spine; his voice was very mournful, making ears buzzing like innumerable needles were piercing their eardrums at the same time. Everybody was trembling, their teeth chattered. There were thousands of white-head crows on the temple's pagoda that night; Ouyang Feng's laughter startled them. 'Caw! Caw! Caw!' they were crying noisily and then they flew away loudly flapping their wings.

Yang Kang thought he would not live to see another day; both eyes looking left and right, trying to find a way to escape.

Wanyan Honglie was also secretly frightened. After the crows noise subsided he said, "This girl is insane, Mister Ouyang, how can you believe what she said? Your honorable nephew came by Xiao Wangye's invitation because Xiao Wang [lit. little king - he was referring to himself] is relying

heavily on his assistance. How could Xiao Wangye harm him without any reason?"

Seemingly without making any effort Ouyang Feng stood up, his body glided over and with a slight bend on his knees he landed on Shagu's side. His left hand grabbed Shagu's arm. "Why did he kill my nephew? Speak up!" he roared.

Shagu was scared to death. "I didn't kill him, don't hurt me! Don't hurt me!" she cried. She struggled hard, but Ouyang Feng's grip was like a pair of steel pliers, how could Shagu free herself? The more she struggled, the harder his grip became. Shagu was frightened and cried, "Mama!"

Ouyang Feng repeated his question several times; Shagu became so scared from crying that she did not dare to cry anymore. She only stared at Ouyang Feng's face with a blank expression.

"Shagu," Huang Rong soothingly said, "Don't be afraid, this nice grandpa is going to give you a cake."

Her words reminded Ouyang Feng. He realized that if he used force, Shagu would not dare to talk; therefore, he groped inside his pocket and produced a dried and already cold steamed bun and held it out to Shagu's hand. "That's right! Here, you can eat this cake."

Shagu grabbed the bun, her fear was gone. "Yeye, you grabbed my arm, it hurt, you must not grab me anymore," she said.

"Good Shagu, you are an obedient child," Ouyang Feng warmly said, "Yeye won't grab your arm anymore."

Huang Rong said, "That day the mister without legs was hugging a lady. Tell me, was she pretty?"

Shagu nodded. "Very pretty. I wonder where she is going."

Huang Rong asked again, "Do you know who she is? You don't know, do you?"

Shagu's face lit, she was so proud of herself; she clapped her hands and said, "I know, I know! She is this good brother's wife!"

Hearing this, any doubt left in Ouyang Feng's heart was gone. He knew his nephew's lecherous character; it must be because of Mu Nianci that his nephew met his fate. But, Ouyang Ke's martial art was higher than Yang Kang's; even though his legs were injured, Yang Kang was still not his match; he could not figure out how Yang Kang was able to kill him? He turned his head toward Yang Kang and said, "My nephew was oblivious to what's good and what's not, he dared to offend the Xiao Wangye's concubine; he deserved to die ten thousand times."

"No ... No ..." Yang Kang stammered. "It wasn't me ..."

"Then who?" Ouyang Feng sternly asked.

Yang Kang was so scared that his knees turned into rubber, cold sweats pouring down his forehead; his usual shrewdness was gone, he was unable to utter a single word.

Huang Rong sighed, "Uncle Ouyang, you can't blame the Xiao Wangye of being heartless, you can't blame your nephew flirtatious character either, you have only your superb martial art to blame."

"How so?" Ouyang Feng was puzzled.

Huang Rong answered, "I don't know why, but in that house at the Ox Village I heard a couple, a man and a woman, were talking. I do not understand what they were discussing."

Listening to this muddy talk with so many unknown Ouyang Feng was more confounded, "What did they say?" he asked.

Huang Rong answered, "I will repeat what they said word for word, I won't add or subtract a single word; please Uncle hear me out. I did not see their faces, I don't know who the man was, I don't know who the woman was either; what I heard was that man said, 'If this fact that I killed Ouyang Ke ever leaks out, won't that be a disaster?' That woman replied, 'A real man is not afraid to take responsibility of his action. If you are afraid, you shouldn't have killed him yesterday. Even though his uncle is very fierce, we can run away to some far away place, he won't be able to find us.'"

Listening to Huang Rong, Ouyang Feng said, "That woman was right. What did the man say?"

While these two were talking, one asked the questions and the other answered, Yang Kang was getting more and more afraid than ever. The moon cast its light through the temple's door, throwing a slanting column of light illuminating the face of the temple's idol. Yang Kang slowly moved away from the light, quietly walked toward Huang Rong's back. He heard Huang Rong answered Ouyang Feng's question.

"That man said, 'Meizi [sister/beloved], I have another thought: his uncle's martial art is unparalleled, I wanted to take him as my master, I have had this thought for a while, but they followed a very strict rule: they only take one disciple per generation. Now that this man is dead, his uncle might take me as his disciple!"

Huang Rong did not mention anybody's name, but she had an uncanny ability to imitate Yang Kang's accent. Yang Kang grew up in the northern area, but Bai Xirou, his

mother, was a native of Lin'an in the south; so Yang Kang's accent was a mixture between northerners and southerners. As soon as Huang Rong said these things, everybody knew it was Yang Kang she was imitating.

Ouyang Feng laughed coldly; he turned his head but did not see Yang Kang.

Suddenly they heard 'whack!', then 'Aiyo!' Someone was crying in alarm. They saw Yang Kang standing under the moonlight with blood dripping from his right hand, his face was deathly pale.

Turned out that when Yang Kang heard Huang Rong was revealing his secret he could not restrain himself much longer; he leaped ferociously, his claw was aimed toward Huang Rong's head. As Huang Rong imitated Yang Kang's accent, she was fully aware he would certainly attack her; therefore, she had guarded against this attack from the start. Her martial art level was higher than Yang Kang's. As soon as she heard the gust of wind she leaned her head sideways to elude, so the claw fell on her shoulder.

Yang Kang had launched the 'Nine Yin White-bone Claw' with all his might, his five fingers landed on the soft hedgehog armor Huang Rong was wearing. A shot of pain traveled from his fingers to his brain; he almost pass out.

The others were clueless as whether it was Yang Kang who made the sneak attack, or was it Huang Rong or Ouyang Feng who attacked him. They were all scared of Ouyang Feng, so nobody dared to say anything.

Wanyan Honglie rushed forward, trying to help. "Kang'er, what happened to you? Where does it hurt?" he asked. Casually he took out the dagger on his belt and placed it on Yang Kang's hand. He realized Ouyang Feng would not

have good intention. He was hoping that in a chaotic battle they, father and son, would be able to save their lives.

Enduring his pain Yang Kang said, "I am all right." He held out his hand to grab the dagger, but his hand was numb, 'clank!' the dagger fell on the floor. Hastily he stooped down to pick it up, but strangely his arm was stiff; it did not want to follow his command anymore. He was extremely shocked. He tried to pinch his right arm with his left fingers, but he did not feel anything. He looked up toward Huang Rong and cried out in horror, "Poison! Poison! You used poison to harm me!"

Peng Lianhu and the others knew they were going to offend Ouyang Feng, but Wanyan Honglie was the Great Jin's prominent Prince; surely this Ouyang Ke affair could be discussed peacefully later. Seeing Yang Kang's frightened expression, they immediately rushed forward to offer words of sympathy and called out to Huang Rong, "Quickly give the antidote to Xiao Wangye!" but everybody stayed as far as possible from Ouyang Feng.

Huang Rong was indifferent, "Don't make a fuss; my soft hedgehog armor does not have any poison on it. There is somebody here who wants to kill him, I don't have to lift a finger to harm him."

But suddenly Yang Kang shouted, "I ... I ... I can't move!" His knees buckled, his body slowly slid down, his mouth was producing a growling noise much like a wild beast.

Huang Rong felt strange and she turned toward Ouyang Feng, but saw that he was carrying a puzzled expression as well. She turned back toward Yang Kang, she saw Yang Kang was strangely happy, a crack of smile appeared on the corners of his mouth. Under the silvery moonlight he looked



inhumanly ghastly. Suddenly a thought came into her mind, she said, "It was Uncle Ouyang who poisoned you."

Ouyang Feng was puzzled, "From the look of him, it was indeed my marvelous snake's poison. I had wanted him to taste it, this little girl had done it on my behalf. Wonderful! Wonderful! But those snakes, I am the only one in this world who owns them, where did the little girl get it from?"

"Where can I get that kind of snakes?" Huang Rong asked, "This is your own poison, you have unwittingly poison him yourself."

"You are talking weird," Ouyang Feng said.

"Uncle Ouyang," Huang Rong said, "I remember your bet against the Old Urchin. You took the poison from your snakes and feed it to a shark. As this shark died of the poison, the second shark ate its flesh and died of the same poison. This way the poison was spreading endlessly. Isn't that so?"

Ouyang Feng laughed, "If my poison is not extraordinary, won't my title 'Western Poison' be in vain?"

"That's right," Huang Rong said, "Nan Xiren was the first shark."

By that time Yang Kang was already rolling around on the ground like a madman. Liang Ziweng wanted to comfort him, but how could he stop him?

Ouyang Feng ignored everything, he knitted his eyebrows trying to understand what Huang Rong was saying, but it was still dark to him. "Please elaborate," he said.

"Hmm, you used your viper to bite Nan Xiren. That day I came across him on the Peach Blossom Island and he hit me. His fist landed on my left shoulder. The sharp needles of

my soft hedgehog armor punctured his hand, so his poisonous blood was transferred to my soft hedgehog armor, which became the second shark. When Xiao Wangye attacked me, heaven's net tightened, his claw grabbed my shoulder. Nan Xiren's poisoned blood was transferred once again to him. Hey, hey, he is the third shark."

Hearing Huang Rong's explanation everybody realized how deathly Ouyang Feng's poison was. They also remembered Yang Kang's treacherous plan in killing the Five Freaks; in the end it was Nan Xiren's blood which kill him. It was truly a revenge well-deserved. A chill crept into everybody's back.

Wanyan Honglie walked toward Ouyang Feng, knelt in front of him and asked, "Mr. Ouyang, please help save my son's life; Xiao Wang will always remember your benevolence."

Ouyang Feng laughed sinisterly, "Your son's life is a life indeed, my nephew's life was not a life!" His gaze swept through Peng Lianhu and the others' faces and coldly said, "Which hero does not agree with me, please speak up!" Everybody recoiled simultaneously. Who would dare to open his mouth?

Yang Kang suddenly leaped up, 'bang!' he hit Liang Ziwen, sending him somersaulted in the air and passed out. Wanyan Honglie stood up, calling, "Quick! Take Xiao Wangye back to Lin'an; we'll find a good doctor to cure his injury."

Ouyang Feng laughed, "Who in this world can neutralize The Old Poison's venom? Which doctor won't want to live and dare to mess up my handiwork?"

Wanyan Honglie ignored him, he shouted toward his martial artists, "What are you waiting for? Quickly take Xiao Wangye away."

Suddenly Yang Kang jumped high until his head almost hit the beam. He pointed his finger at Wanyan Honglie and he shouted, "You are not my father! You killed my mother, now you kill me!"

Wanyan Honglie stepped back and stumbled down. Sha Tongtian said, "Xiao Wangye, please calm down." He stepped forward to grab Yang Kang's arms. Unexpectedly Yang Kang flipped his hand to push away Sha Tongtian's hand and quickly seized his arm. Yang Kang's left hand formed a claw scratching Sha Tongtian's arm.

Sha Tongtian cried in pain, hastily he rolled backward to escape, but a moment later he felt itchiness on his arm. He was terror-stricken!

"This is the fourth shark," Huang Rong coldly said.

Peng Lianhu and Sha Tongtian were good friends, moreover, Peng Lianhu was also an expert poison user, he knew Sha Tongtian was poisoned and his life was in grave danger. In this critical moment almost without thinking he took the saber from his waist and swiftly chopped Sha Tongtian's arm halfway down.

Hou Tonghai did not understand Peng Lianhu's good intention, "Peng Lianhu, you dare to hurt my 'Shige'? [Elder martial brother]" He charged Peng Lianhu disregarding his own safety.

Sha Tongtian endured the pain and shouted, "Idiot, back-off! Brother Peng was saving my life!"

By this time Yang Kang's mind was cloudy, he was charging to the east and striking to the west, kicking and biting randomly. Everybody saw what happened to Sha Tongtian, nobody dared to come close to him; shouting and yelling they darted out of the temple.

It was a very chaotic situation; the crows on the pagoda were startled, they flew around in confusion under the moonlight around the temple's courtyard. Their noisy cries intermingled with Yang Kang's neighing voice.

As Wanyan Honglie was heading toward the temple door he turned his head one more time and called out, "Kang'er! Kang'er!"

Yang Kang's eyes were brimming with tears; he also called out, "Fu Wang! Fu Wang! [Father King]" He walked toward Wanyan Honglie.

Wanyan Honglie was delighted, he spread out his arms and hugged Yang Kang tightly, "Child, are you feeling better?"

Under the moonlight Yang Kang's face suddenly changed; he opened his mouth, revealing two rows of white teeth, ready to bite. Wanyan Honglie was shocked. His left hand pushed out, breaking the hug. Yang Kang's strength was completely gone; he fell backwards. He struggled hard to crawl back up to no avail.

Wanyan Honglie did not dare to linger much longer, without looking back he hurriedly went out the temple, mounted his horse and ran as fast as he could. The others were close on his heels, and in a short moment the temple was quiet again.

Ouyang Feng and Huang Rong saw Yang Kang was rolling around on the ground, each with his/her own thought, nobody said anything. A moment later Yang Kang's body curled up and then ceased to move altogether.

"Enough commotion for half a night," Ouyang Feng coldly said, "It's almost daybreak; let us go looking for your father."

"Right now my father is on the Peach Blossom Island," Huang Rong said, "Why do you want to look for him?"

Ouyang Feng was taken aback, "So the little girl was lying all along," he sneered.

"The first few sentences were indeed to swindle you," Huang Rong admitted, "What kind of man do you think my father is? How could he let himself surrounded by a bunch of stinky Quanzhen priests? If I did not mention the Nine Yin Manual you wouldn't let me interrogate Shagu."

By this time Ke Zhen'E had totally admired Huang Rong, but he was sad and full of regret at the same time. He only hoped she would find a clever trick to escape soon. He heard Ouyang Feng said, "There were three parts truth in your lies, otherwise, the Old Poison wouldn't be so easily deceived. All right then, recite your father's translation to me from the beginning to the end, don't skip even half a word."

"What if I don't remember?" Huang Rong asked.

"It will be best if you remember, otherwise the beautiful face of a smart little girl would be bitten by my snakes, now that won't be fun, will it?" Ouyang Feng threatened.

When Huang Rong jumped out from behind the idol she was ready to die; but seeing Yang Kang's pitiful death she could not help but feeling frightened. She thought, "Even if I give him Reverend Yideng's translation he still won't let me go. Is it so difficult to escape from his grip?"

She paced back and forth for a while but still could not think of a good way to escape, so she decided to buy some time and think again later. "If I read the original text I might remember the interpretation. Why don't you recite it to me, let me try explaining it to you," she said.

“Who could memorize these mumbo jumbo sentences?”  
Ouyang Feng said, “You don’t have to confuse me.”

As she heard Ouyang Feng was not able to recite it from memory Huang Rong got a sudden inspiration. After contemplating it back and forth she came to a conclusion, “He can’t memorize it, so he must treat the manual as precious as his life.” She quickly said, “All right then, take out the manual and read it to me.”

Ouyang Feng was determined to hear the explanation; immediately he took an oil-cloth package from his pocket, after opening three layers of cloth he produced Guo Jing’s altered manual from it. Huang Rong was amused, “Jing Gege wrote a whole bunch of nonsense, yet the Old Poison treats it as the most precious object.”

Ouyang Feng lighted a fire and found a half-burned candle from the worship table, with which light he started to read the manual, “Hu bu er, ken xing duo de, si gen liu bu.”

“That means ‘differentiate it well then divide it into twelve air passages’,” Huang Rong said.

Ouyang Feng was delighted, “Ji er wen hua si, ha hu,” he read again.

“Capable of healing various illness, gradually entering divine perfection,” Huang Rong said.

Ouyang Feng read, “Qu da bie si tu, en ni qu.”

Huang Rong hesitated for a moment, shaking her head she said, “Not right, you did not read correctly.”

“No, I read it correctly,” Ouyang Feng said, “That is what was written.”

"That's strange," Huang Rong said, "How come it's so muddled?" Her left hand on her head, she pretended to be thinking hard.

Ouyang Feng was anxious. He stared at her, hoping she would find the answer quickly. A moment later Huang Rong exclaimed, "Ah, I know! It must be that dumb kid Guo Jing writing it wrong. Let me see."

Ouyang Feng was not afraid Huang Rong would steal it from him, he handed the manual over. Huang Rong held out her right hand to take the manual, while her left hand took the candlestick, pretending to examine the manual closely. Suddenly her feet kicked the ground; she leaped backward for more than a 'zhang' [10 feet/3 meter]. She held the manual within half a 'chi' [approximately half a foot] to the candle and shouted, "Uncle Ouyang, this manual is fake, I'd better burn it down."

Ouyang Feng was shocked, hastily said, "Hey, hey, what are you doing? Quickly give that back to me."

Huang Rong smiled, "Do you want the manual, or my life?"

"What do I want your life for? Quickly give that back to me," Ouyang Feng said. His voice was urgent, unusually anxious. His body leaned forward as if ready to strike anytime.

Huang Rong held the manual two more inches closer to the candle. "Stop! I am going to burn this manual as soon as you move one more step, then you'll regret it for the rest of your life."

Ouyang Feng silently agreed with what she said. "Humph, you win," he said, "Put that manual down and go before I change my mind!"

"You are a grand master of your school, you must not go back on your own words," Huang Rong said.

Ouyang Feng calmly said, "I said just put the manual down and you can go."

Huang Rong knew that he was a proud man; although he was evil and cruel he had never broken his promise to anybody, so she put the manual along with the candle on the ground and smiled, "Uncle Ouyang, please excuse me." Carrying her dog-beating stick she turned around and walked away.

Contrary to what she was expecting, Ouyang Feng did not even look at her. He jumped back and with a loud 'bang!' he smashed the Wang Yanzhang idol with the back of his hand, the idol broke halfway down. "Blind man Ke, roll out!" he shouted.

Huang Rong was startled; she turned her head only to see Ke Zhen'E had jumped out from behind the idol, brandishing his iron spear in front of his body. Huang Rong immediately realized her misjudgment, "With the Old Poison's ability how could he not know Master Ke was hiding behind the idol? He must've heard his breathing early on, only he waited patiently for a good opportunity to expose him." She dashed forward quickly, standing in front of Ke Zhen'E with the bamboo stick in front of her body.

"Uncle Ouyang, I am not going, you let him go," said Huang Rong.

"No, Rong'er, you go" Ke Zhen'E said, "Go find Jing'er, tell him to avenge our six lives."

Huang Rong mournfully answered, "If he is ever going to believe what I say, he would have already believed what I said. Master Ke, if you don't go, my father and I will have a



hard time proving our innocence. Tell Guo Jing that I don't blame him, tell him not to feel bad." But how could Ke Zhen'E let her embrace danger to save his own life? Two people were bickering incessantly.

Ouyang Feng became impatient, "Little girl, I let you go, you don't want to go. What are you waiting for?"

"I'd love to stay," Huang Rong said, "Uncle Ouyang, get this blind man out of here, I will accompany you chit-chatting, just don't hurt him."

Ouyang Feng thought, "You want to stay, that was what I want. Whether this blind man lives or dies, what does it have anything to do with me?" With big strides he went forward, holding out his hand to grab Ke Zhen'E on his chest.

Ke Zhen'E moved his spear to attack the incoming hand. Ouyang Feng raised his arm a little bit and Ke Zhen'E's arms were numb, he felt pressure on his chest. 'Clank!' his spear flew upward, made a hole on the ceiling and landed on the temple's roof.

Ke Zhen'E hastily leaped backward, but before his feet landed on the floor he felt his collar was pulled, his body was hung in front of Ouyang Feng. His battle experience was vast; in this dangerous moment he did not get nervous. His left hand moved slightly and two 'du ling' [poisonous water chestnut] flew toward the enemy's face.

Ouyang Feng did not anticipate that in the face of danger Ke Zhen'E was still able to attack. They were very close to each other, the incoming attack was strong, it was difficult to parry; Ouyang Feng bent his body backward but his hand did not let Ke Zhen'E go, Ke Zhen'E was thrown across the top of his head.

When he jumped out from behind the idol Ke Zhen'E was facing the temple's door, so Ouyang Feng's throw made him fly out of the door. Because Ouyang Feng's force was so strong, Ke Zhen'E's body was actually flying faster than his own 'du ling'. The 'du ling' missed Ouyang Feng's head and flew straight toward Ke Zhen'E's body.

"Aiyo!" Huang Rong cried out. But she saw that while he was airborne Ke Zhen'E was able to turn his body slightly, stretched out his right hand and deftly caught his own two 'du ling's. His ability to hear and differentiate secret-projectiles wind had been trained to near perfection; his ears could hear as clearly as other people could see.

"You are good!" Ouyang Feng exclaimed, "Blind man Ke, I'll let you go."

Ke Zhen'E landed on his feet, he was reluctant to go. Huang Rong laughed, "Master Ke, Ouyang Feng wanted to be my disciple; he wants to learn the Nine Yin Manual from me. You still want to stay; do you also want to be my disciple?"

Ke Zhen'E knew that although Huang Rong talked jokingly, but her situation was extremely precarious. He stood on the temple courtyard, but was hesitant to go.

Ouyang Feng looked up to the sky and said, "It's daybreak. Let's go!" Pulling Huang Rong's hand they walked out the temple's door.

"Master Ke, remember the letter I wrote on your palm," Huang Rong called out. They moved really fast, Huang Rong's last few words were heard from several 'zhang's away.

Ke Zhen'E stayed motionless for a long time. He heard flock upon flock of crows that came into the temple to feast on the corpse, so he leaped onto the roof to find his spear pole.

Leaning against his pole on the roof again he stayed motionless for a while, thinking the heaven and earth are boundless, but what kind of place could a blind man like him call home? Then he heard the crows cried mournfully and they dropped to the ground one by one. Turned out those crows were feasting on Yang Kang's corpse and they were poisoned one after another. Ke Zhen'E could not help but heaving a long sighed. He jumped back down to the ground, wielding his spear he walked to the north.

On the third day suddenly he heard eagle cry high up in the sky. He thought that if the birds were close by, then Guo Jing must not be very far; therefore, he raised his voice and shouted in the middle of the wilderness, "Jing'er, Jing'er!"

Not too long afterwards he heard hoof beats; it was indeed Guo Jing riding the little red horse coming toward him. He was separated from Ke Zhen'E in the chaotic battle the other night; this time he saw his master was well his joy was unspeakable. He did not even wait for the horse to stop; he jumped from the horseback and rushed to embrace his master, calling loudly, "Da Shifu!"

Unexpectedly Ke Zhen'E slapped him left and right until his ears were red. Guo Jing was stunned, but did not dare to fend off. He let his master off his embrace. Ke Zhen'E continued to slap Guo Jing with his left hand, while his right hand slapped his own face until his own ears were red.

Guo Jing was confounded, "Da Shifu, what happened to you?"

Ke Zhen'E viciously scolded, "You are the little muddle-head; I am the old muddle-head."

Dozens or so slaps later he calmed down and stopped. Both men's faces were red and swollen. Ke Zhen'E kept cursing

Guo Jing and himself for half a day before finally he narrated everything that had happened in the temple.

Guo Jing was surprised yet happy, sorrowful yet ashamed, "So that's what actually happened. I had wrongly accused Rong'er," he thought.

"Tell me, don't we deserve to die?" Ke Zhen'E shouted. Guo Jing agreed, he also said, "Disciple deserves to die; Da Shifu's eyes are not perfect, you cannot be blamed."

Ke Zhen'E was angry, "Damn it! My eyes are blind, is my heart also blind?"

Guo Jing tried to divert his attention, "We must quickly think of something to rescue Rong'er."

"What about her father?" Ke Zhen'E asked.

"Huang Daozhu [Island Master Huang] had taken Hong Enshi [Benevolent Master Hong] to recuperate on the Peach Blossom Island," Guo Jing answered, "Da Shifu, where do you think Ouyang Feng is taking Rong'er?"

Ke Zhen'E pondered for a moment, then said, "Rong'er is in his hands, even if she did not die, I don't know what kind of tortures she would be subjected to. Jing'er, you quickly rescue her, I am going to kill myself to thank her."

"No!" Guo Jing cried out in alarm, "Don't even think of doing such thing." However, he knew his first master's stubbornness very well, he would not listen to other people; once he said he would die, he was not going to back off; therefore, Guo Jing quickly said, "Da Shifu, you'd better go to the Peach Blossom Island to ask Huang Daozhu to lend us a hand. In all honesty, I am not Ouyang Feng's match."

Ke Zhen'E thought it was not a bad idea, so he picked his spear and left. Guo Jing was reluctant to part with his first

master, he followed him behind. Ke Zhen'E knew he was being followed, he swung his spear backward and scolded, "You are still not going? If you don't rescue my beloved Rong'er, I am going to take your little life!"

Guo Jing had no choice but stopped, his gaze followed his master until he disappeared beyond the mulberry grove toward the east. He had no idea where to start looking for Huang Rong. After thinking hard for quite a while he took his horse and pair of eagles and walked back to the Temple of the Iron Spear.

Around the temple he saw countless dead crows; on the courtyard he saw a pile of human remains. Guo Jing hated Yang Kang for killing his masters, but thought that Yang Kang was already dead, so he was willing to write-off that debt; moreover, he was his sworn brother. Guo Jing picked the remains and buried Yang Kang on the temple's courtyard. He bowed in respect in front of the grave and said, "Brother Yang, if you know how I buried your remains today, you have to bless me in finding Rong'er; that way you can make up for your crimes during your lifetime." Afterward Guo Jing started to make inquiries everywhere, trying to track Huang Rong's trail.

Half a year had passed, autumn turned into winter, then winter turned into spring. Guo Jing, accompanied by his red horse and a pair of eagles have looked everywhere; he asked the Beggar Clan, went to the Quanzhen Sect, and inquired all Wulin characters he knew, yet nobody heard even a little bit of news about Huang Rong. He was miserable. He imagined how much suffering Huang Rong had to endure this past half a year; it was like a knife was piercing his heart. He was determined to find her, even to the end of the earth.

He had been to Yanjing, twice he had tried to find Wanyan Honglie at Bianliang, yet Wanyan Honglie also disappeared without a trace. The Beggar Clan members all over the country had tried to find their Bangzhu [Clan Leader], but still there were no words about Huang Rong. Guo Jing also stopped by the Cloud Village, but the village was burned to the ground. He did not know what kind of disaster Lu Chengfeng and Lu Guanying had encountered.

One day he arrived within the Shandong border. Nine out of ten houses he saw along the way were deserted; he barely saw other people walking around. He heard that the Mongolians and the Jins were fighting each other in that area. The Jins were defeated and while retreating they stopped at nothing; raping and plundering the people along their way.

Guo Jing walked for three more days heading north. The further he went, the more devastation he witnessed. His heart was embittered looking at the suffering of the common people as the result of war.

That day he arrived at a small village by a river bank in a valley; he was going to stop by for food and water for him as well as his horse, when suddenly he heard a commotion just ahead of him. People were screaming and horses were neighing in panic; dozens of Jin soldiers had entered the village. They set the village on fire, forcing the people to go out of their houses. If there was a young girl in the house, the soldiers would seize her and bind her with ropes. The rest of the people, young and old alike, were killed right there and then.

Guo Jing was seething with anger; he charged his horse toward the leader of this pack, snatching his spear; the back of Guo Jing's left hand smacked his 'tai yang' [sun] acupoint. By that time Guo Jing had already reached high

level in term of martial art skill; his strength was profound. With just one hit that officer's eyes came out of their sockets and he died instantly.

The rest of the soldiers were shouting and yelling; sabers and spears attacked simultaneously. The little red horse was not afraid of battle; it dashed forward carrying Guo Jing on its back. Guo Jing snatched a saber with his left hand, and using the mutual hands combat technique he thrust the spear in his right hand and hacked the saber in his left, attacking the soldiers left and right.

As soon as the Jin soldiers saw this person's fierceness, they lost their will to fight; they turned around and fled from the village. But suddenly a big banner appeared amidst the smoke; a squad of Mongolian soldiers had arrived. The Jin soldiers who had been defeated earlier did not dare to fight the Mongolian troops head-on so they turned back to the village, hoping they would be able to slip by Guo Jing relying on sheer numbers.

Guo Jing hated the Jin soldiers for cruelly abusing the people; he charged his horse toward the village entrance and single-handedly defending it against the intruders. About a dozen or so soldiers courageously attacked him; Guo Jing killed them all. The rest of the soldiers did not dare to attack but they could not go back either; they ran around in confusion, screaming in fear.

The Mongolian soldiers saw ahead of them somebody was helping them; they charged the rest of the Jin soldiers and killed them all. The 'bai fu zhang' [leader of a 100 men unit] was about to inquire Guo Jing's background when suddenly one the Mongolian soldier recognized him. That soldier shouted, "Jin dao fu ma! [the golden-blade consort]" and immediately knelt on the ground.

The 'bai fu zhang' heard Guo Jing was their Great Khan's son-in-law, he did not dare to be impolite; hastily he dismounted his horse and also kneeled on the ground while dispatching a courier to quickly inform their commander-in-chief.

The villagers, young and old, were coming out of their hiding places to thank Guo Jing when suddenly from outside the village came a loud thundering noise of cavalry's hoof beats. The people were frightened; they looked at each other in blank dismay.

A bay horse with a black mane came fast, a young general shouted, "Where is Guo Jing Anda [Mongolian term for sworn brother]?"

Guo Jing saw it was Tuolei, he was delighted. "Tuolei Anda," he answered. They rushed forward and hugged each other. The pair of eagles recognized Tuolei, they flew down and lovingly rubbed their necks to him.

Tuolei ordered a 'qian fu zhang' [leader of a 1000-men unit] to pursue the Jin soldiers, while the rest of his troops pitched their tents right there on the hillside; then he told Guo Jing everything that had happened since the last time they parted.

Tuolei told the war affair of the northern countries; only then did Guo Jing find out that within the last few years Genghis Khan attacked to the east and sent expedition to the west, expanded his territory. Jochi, Chagatai, Ogedei and Tuolei, four princes; plus Mukhali, Borchu, Boroul and Chilaun, the Great Khan's four heroes, his right-hand men, all had established many distinguished services.

Presently Tuolei and Mukhali were leading their troops to attack the Jin toward the east; they had fought several battles and utterly routed Jin's army. The Jins ran to the



fortified city of Tongguan; did not dare to come out to Shandong to fight.

Guo Jing stayed with Tuolei's troops for several days. A fast dispatch came one day; Genghis Khan ordered all princes and generals to go back north for a general assembly. Tuolei and Mukhali did not dare to linger much longer, they assigned their second-in-commands to lead the troops and that very same night they rode north. Guo Jing missed his mother, so he came along with Tuolei to the north.

In less than a day they had arrived at the bank of River Onon. As far as eyes could see, the vast prairies were full of tents, tens of thousands of warhorses running around and neighing, tens of thousands spearheads gleaming brilliantly under the bright sun light. In the middle of countless gray tents towered a big yellow silk tent. The tent ornaments were made of cast gold; above it fluttered nine big banners.

Guo Jing's horse stood on the river bank as he watched this awe-inspiring military prowess. He thought about how the great power in this Golden Tent had shaken the desert, wiping out the other rulers of the area. He imagined how Genghis Khan would issue his commands from the Golden Tent; then fast horses would be dispatched to deliver the orders to the tens of thousands soldiers under the princes and the generals. The bugles would sound and the beacons on the prairie would be lighted, their fires reaching the sky. Arrows would fill the sky like a swarm of locusts, spears and blades would flash, horses and infantrymen would march amidst the dust rising to the sky.

Guo Jing thought, "The Great Khan wants to amass this much land, I wonder what he wants to do with it?" Suddenly he saw the dust rise and a group of cavalry came to welcome them. Three people, Tuolei, Mukhali and Guo Jing entered the Golden Tent to see the Great Khan. To his

surprise he saw all the princes and the generals were already sitting on either side of the tent.

Genghis Khan was overjoyed to see these three people. Tuolei and Mukhali immediately reported the military situation. Guo Jing stepped forward and kneeled, saying, "The Great Khan has assigned me to sever the Jin prince, Wanyan Honglie's head. I met him several times, yet every time he was able to escape. I am ready to accept The Great Khan's punishment."

Genghis Khan laughed, he said, "When the young eagle grows up, there will come a day when it will catch the fox. Why would I want to punish you? You arrived just in time; I often thought about you."

The assembly then proceeded by discussing military plans to destroy the Jins. Mukhali proposed that since the Jins occupied the fortified city of Tongguan, it would be difficult to attack; the best plan would be forming an alliance with the Southern Song and execute a converging attack.

"Good! Let us do it then," Genghis Khan said. Immediately he assigned his secretary to write the letter and sent an envoy to go south. The general assembly convened until dusk that day.

Guo Jing left the Golden Tent, under the darkened sky he walked to his mother's tent. Suddenly a pair of hands appeared from behind, about to cover his eyes. With his current martial art skill how could he let anybody launched a sneak attack? He leaned sideways and was going to push that person away when suddenly his nostrils caught a whiff of perfume, then he saw it was a girl. Quickly he pulled back his hand and called out, "Sister Huazheng!" It was indeed Princess Huazheng standing in the dark with smile all over her face.

They have not seen each other for several years. This time they met again, Guo Jing saw she was growing taller. She just stood there among the tall grass, her skin jade-white; she looked beautiful yet valiant. Guo Jing called again, “Meizi! [Younger Sister, used in a more intimate way]”

Huazheng was extremely happy that tears flowed down her cheeks, “You really came back!”

Guo Jing was touched by the sincere expression of her feeling. Thousands of words were dancing around his mind, but he did not know where to start.

After a few minutes of silence Huazheng said, “Go see your mother. You came back alive, guess who will be happier, your mother or I?”

“My mother will be very happy, I am sure,” Guo Jing said.

Huazheng pouted, “Do you think I am not happy?”

The Mongolians were more frank, they would say what they think. Guo Jing had lived among the southerners for quite some time; unconsciously he had been influenced by the way the southerners talked. Now he went back to his childhood home and heard Huazheng talked in a friendly manner, a warm feeling filled his heart. Two people walked hand in hand toward Li Ping’s tent. Mother and son met and there were more tears of happiness.

Several days later Genghis Khan summoned Guo Jing, “I have heard your conducts and deeds from Tuolei. You keep your words and have an upright heart, I like that very much. Just wait several more days, I am going to give you my daughter’s hand in marriage.”

Guo Jing was startled, he thought, “Right now I don’t even know if Rong’er is dead or alive. How can I marry someone

else?" Seeing Genghis Khan's imposing appearance, although he wanted to disobey, he stammered and nothing intelligible came out of his mouth. Genghis Khan misunderstood his behavior; he thought Guo Jing was ecstatic that he turned silly. Immediately Genghis Khan prepared a dowry for Guo Jing: one thousand maidservants, one hundred catties of gold, five hundred cows, two thousand sheep, plus he was told to prepare his own wedding and take anything he needed from Khan's treasury.

Huazheng was Genghis Khan's only daughter from his first wife; she was her father's beloved since she was very little. By that time Genghis Khan's power had already spread throughout the Mongolian desert, he had subdued many other Khans; who, upon hearing their Great Khan was going to give his daughter's hand in marriage, immediately sent precious gifts in abundance. Not too long afterwards, more than a dozen big tents were needed to store all the gifts.

Princess Huazheng was so happy that she could not erase the smile from her face; Guo Jing, on the other hand, looked so haggard, his mind was filled with anxiety. He was often caught looking blankly to a far away place with a dejected look on his face.

Li Ping noticed her son's countenance was unusual, one evening she asked Guo Jing point blankly inside their tent. Guo Jing recounted everything about Huang Rong, from the day they met until they parted a few months ago. Li Ping listened attentively; she was silent for half a day.

"Ma [Mother]," Guo Jing asked, "Your son is in a difficult situation, I don't know how to manage this."

"Great Khan has shown profound kindness to us, how can we forget it?" Li Ping answered, "But that Rong'er, that Rong'er, ay! Even though I have never met her, I believe she is an adorable girl."

"Ma," Guo Jing suddenly said, "If Father were in this situation, how would he act?"

This question was unexpected to Li Ping; she was silent for half a day; remembering her late husband's personality; and then with conviction in her voice said, "Your father would rather suffer a hardship than offending other people."

Guo Jing stood up, with a quivering voice he said, "Even though this son of yours has never seen his father, I should follow my father's footsteps. If Rong'er is safe, your son will honor my promise to marry Princess Huazheng; but if Rong'er faced calamity, your son will not marry for as long as I live."

Li Ping thought, "That is a proper thing to do, but how can I let you be the last descendant of the Guo family? Nevertheless, this child is the same as his father, both were stubborn. Once they made a decision what other people say would be useless." Thereupon she asked, "How are you going to report to the Great Khan?"

"I will tell the Great Khan the truth," Guo Jing answered.

Li Ping was willing to support her son's intention. "Good," she said, "We can't put this off much longer. Go ahead and say thank you to the Great Khan, we, mother and son, will leave for the south even today." Guo Jing nodded his approval.

That very same evening mother and son prepared their bags. Other than a few changes of clothes and some silvers,

they left the Great Khan's gifts in the tent.

As soon as they were finished Guo Jing said, "I am going to take my leave from the Princess."

Li Ping hesitated, "How can you tell her? We'd better leave quietly, spare her the heartache," she said.

"No," Guo Jing said, "I will personally tell her." Leaving his tent, he walked towards Huazheng's tent.

Huazheng and her mother lived in a big tent; they were busy discussing the wedding preparation. Suddenly Huazheng heard Guo Jing's voice calling her from outside the tent. She was blushing, "Ma!" she said.

Her mother smiled, "You are going to get married in a few days, yet you cannot bear not to see each other for just a day. All right, you may go."

Huazheng smiled and walked out the tent. "Guo Jing Gege [big brother]," she called.

"Meizi [younger sister], I have something I need to tell you," Guo Jing said. He led her walking to the west. Two people walked several li's into the prairie, far from the big camp, and sat side by side on the grass.

Huazheng leaned against Guo Jing's body. Lowering her head she said, "Jing Gege, I also have something I want to tell you."

Guo Jing was slightly startled, "Ah! So you know already?" he said. He thought it would be better for her to find out, since he did not know where to start.

"Know what?" Huazheng was confused, "I wanted to tell you that I am not the Great Khan's daughter."

“What?” Guo Jing was surprised.

Huazheng lifted up her eyes toward the crescent moon on the horizon, she slowly said, “After I am married to you, I will forget that I am the Great Khan’s daughter, I am only Guo Jing’s wife. If you want to beat me or scold me, go ahead and do it. Don’t think that because my father is the Great Khan you have to submit to me.”

Guo Jing felt a mixture of bitter-sweet and warm and fuzzy feeling in his heart, he said, “Meizi, you treated me very well. It’s a pity I don’t deserve to have you.”

“What do you mean you don’t deserve me?” Huazheng countered, “You are the kindest man in the world, except for my father, nobody is better than you. Even my four elder brothers don’t hold a candle compared to you.”

Guo Jing was silent for a long time; he was going to leave Mongolia for the south early in the morning the next day, yet he did not know how to tell her.

Huazheng continued, “These past several days I have been so happy. I remember that time when I heard you had died I was going to die with you. Lucky for me Brother Tuolei snatched the dagger from my hand; otherwise how can I marry you now? Guo Jing Gege, I’d rather die than not being your wife.”

Guo Jing silently thought, “Rong’er won’t talk to me like this; but both of them are very kind to me.” Thinking about Huang Rong he could not help letting out a long sigh.

“Uh, why did you sigh?” Huazheng wondered.

“It was nothing,” Guo Jing reluctantly said.

Huazheng said, “Hmm, my first brother and second brother didn’t like you, but my third brother and fourth brother are

very fond of you. I have told my father frankly that the first brother and second brother are not good, third brother and fourth brother are good, so you don't have to worry."

"Why would I worry?" Guo Jing wondered.

Huazheng was very proud of herself, "I heard mother said that since Father is getting older, he wants to appoint the Khan's Crown Prince. Can you guess who will be chosen?"

"Naturally your first brother, Jochi. Not only he is the oldest, but has rendered most service as well," Guo Jing said.

Huazheng shook her head, "My guess is not the first brother, most likely the third brother, or even the fourth brother."

Guo Jing knew Genghis Khan's eldest son Jochi was smart and very competent; the second son, Chagatai was brave and a good strategist. These two men did not bow to each other, their competition was most ardent. The third son Ogedei loved to drink and to hunt; generosity was one of his traits. He realized that after his father passed away, the successor would be either his first or second brother. But among the four princes of the Khan, actually Tuolei was his father's favorite. He realized he had no chance to become the next Khan; therefore, he had never fought over the position of the crown prince. He was in good terms with all of his three brothers.

Guo Jing was not convinced by Huazheng's explanation, "Would the Great Khan appoint the Khan's Crown Prince based on what you said?" he asked.

"I am not sure about that either," Huazheng said, "That was my blind guess. But even if the first brother or the second brother becomes the next Khan, you don't have to worry



either. If they make things difficult for you, I will fight them to the death." Huazheng was Genghis Khan's beloved daughter; 30% of the time her four elder brothers yielded to her.

Guo Jing knew she would do what she said; he slightly smile and said, "You don't have to do that."

"Why not?" Huazheng said, "If my brothers don't treat us nicely, we can go together to the south."

"That's what I was going to say," Guo Jing blurted, "I must go back to the south."

Huazheng was silent for a moment, "I am afraid mother and father won't let me go," she said.

"It's only me ..." Guo Jing started to say, but Huazheng cut him off, "Hmm, I will always listen to you. If you say we are going south, I am coming with you. If mother and father won't give their permission, we'll elope."

Guo Jing could not hold himself much longer, he jumped and stood up, "It's only two people, me and my mother who are going back south," he said. Having said this, one was standing up, the other was sitting down, four eyes looked at each other, both stayed still like a pair of statues.

Huazheng's face showed confusion and despair, she did not understand what he was saying. "Meizi," Guo Jing broke the silence, "Please forgive me! I can't marry you."

"Why? What did I do wrong? You are blaming me for not killing myself, are you not?" Huazheng was confused.

Guo Jing almost shouted, "NO! No! It's not your fault. I don't know whose fault it is; I have thought back and forth, and if I should blame anybody, it should be me."

Henceforth he started telling Huazheng everything about Huang Rong. When he got to the part on how Huang Rong was currently held captive by Ouyang Feng, and that he had searched high and low for half a year without finding any trace of her; Huazheng could feel the excitement in his voice, she was unable to hold her tears from falling down.

Finally Guo Jing said, "Meizi, please just forget me, I must go and look for her."

"After you found her, would you come back here looking for me?" Huazheng asked.

"If she is safe and well, I will certainly go back north," Guo Jing promised, "At that time, if you did not shut me off and still want me, I will marry you. I definitely won't regret it."

Huazheng slowly said, "You don't have to say that. You know I will always want you to marry me. Go and find her, whether it will be ten years, twenty years, as long as I am still alive, I am going to wait for you in this grassland."

Guo Jing was excited, "Yes," he exclaimed, "Ten years, twenty years, I am going to look for her. Ten years, twenty years, I will also remember that you are waiting for me in this grassland."

Huazheng sprang up and threw herself into his bosom, weeping uncontrollably. Guo Jing embraced her gently, his eyes were turning red. Two people hugged each other without saying anything. Things had come this far, they knew if they say another word they would only grieve the other.

After a long time, they saw four riders from the west came rushing by; they swept pass by Guo Jing and Huazheng's side, went directly to the Golden Tent. They were still about dozens of 'zhang's away from the Golden Tent when

suddenly one of the horses fell down and was unable to stand again; it was obvious that this horse was very tired, it dropped dead right then and there. The rider stood up and without casting a single glance toward his dead horse he dashed wildly into the Golden Tent.

A short moment later ten men with horns in their hand rushed out of the Golden Tent; they faced four directions and blow their horns, "Whooo! Whooo! Whooo!"

Guo Jing knew it was Genghis Khan's most urgent call, whether it was his own son or his beloved general, if anybody did not show up by the time the Great Khan had bent all his ten fingers, he would be beheaded immediately, no question asked.

"The Great Khan summons us!" Guo Jing shouted. Without saying anything to Huazheng he used his lightness kungfu and flew toward the Golden Tent. He heard hoof beats coming urgently from all directions.

When Guo Jing arrived at the tent, Genghis Khan had only bent three fingers; and when he had bent eight fingers all the princes and senior generals were fully assembled. Genghis Khan loudly roared, "Does that dog king Muhammad have quicker princes? Does he have such gallant generals?"

"NO!" the assembly answered in unison.

Genghis Khan beat his chest and shouted, "Look! These are my special envoys to Khoresm; see how did that dog king Muhammad treat my loyal servants?" Every eye followed the Great Khan's finger. They saw several Mongolians with their faces swollen black and blue; their beards completely burnt. Beards were the Mongolian warriors' sign of dignity; it was considered a great insult just to bump into it, how

much more insulting was it to burn it completely? As soon as the assembly saw this, everyone exploded in angry roars.

Genghis Khan said, "Khoresm is a big country with a strong army, but are we afraid of them? Because we have been concentrating our effort to battle the Jins, we were very lenient to them. Jochi my son, tell everybody how we should deal with that dog king Muhammad."

Jochi stepped forward and said with a loud voice, "That year Father King sent your son to attack the deserved-to-die Mergid people. Your son returned triumphantly. That dog king Muhammad also sent a big army to attack the Mergids. Two armies met. Your son sent a good-will envoy, saying that Father King sincerely wished to be friend with the Khoresm. That red-bearded dog king actually said, 'Genghis Khan did not order you to attack me, but Allah had sent me to attack you.' As a result we were engaged in a fierce battle. We had gained the upper hand, but because the enemy was ten-times our number, we quietly withdrew the troops at midnight."

Boroul suddenly said, "For all that the Great Khan still showed respect towards this dog king. We sent a trade caravan, but the cargo was robbed by that dog king, while our merchants were killed. This time we sent ambassadors of goodwill, that dog king has listened to that Jin dog prince Wanyan Honglie's instigation; he killed half of the Great Khan's messengers, while burning the other half's beards and sent them back home."

Hearing the name Wanyan Honglie, Guo Jing's heart turned cold, "Is Wanyan Honglie at the Khoresm?" he asked.

One of the burnt messengers answered, "I recognized him. He sat by that dog king's side, constantly talking in low voice with that dog king."

Genghis Khan called out, "The Jin dog has joined forces with Khoresm, they are going to press us from both sides, are we afraid of them?"

The assembly answered with one voice, "Our Great Khan is peerless in the world. You order us to attack the Khoresm, we will crush their cities, burn down their buildings, kill their men off, taking captive of their women and livestock!"

Genghis Khan shouted, "We must capture Muhammad! We must capture Wanyan Honglie!" The assembly answered his cry with a cheering so loud that the candle lights inside the tent swayed. Genghis Khan took his saber out and swung it in front of him. He rushed outside the tent, leaped onto his horseback. The assembly followed him out of the tent and mounted their horses.

Genghis Khan rode his horse several 'li's into the prairie until he arrived at a small hill. The assembly knew he wanted to be left alone to think, so they did not go up the hill, but formed a ring surrounding the small hill. Genghis Khan saw Guo Jing was standing not too far from him, he called, "Son, come here." Guo Jing galloped his horse uphill.

Genghis Khan swept his gaze on the prairie, where the light from his army camp flickered like stars scattered throughout the vast grassland. He raised his whip and said, "Son, that day we were surrounded by Sangum and Jamukha on the mountain, I had said something to you. Do you remember what I said?"

"I remember," Guo Jing answered, "The Great Khan said that we the Mongolians have many valiant men. As long as we do not fight our own people and join our forces, we will be able to call the world our grazing land."

'Crack!' Genghis Khan twirled his horse whip into the air, he called out, "That's right! Now the Mongolians have

joined forces, let us go and capture that Wanyan Honglie.”

Guo Jing had decided to go back south with his mother the next day, suddenly this matter arose, how could he forget to avenge his father’s death? Moreover, his mother and he have received Khan’s generosity. The opportunity had presented itself for him to repay this debt of gratitude; so he called out, “This time we will surely capture that scoundrel Wanyan Honglie.”

“Rumor has it that the Khoresm army is one million men strong, but I estimate their number to be close to six, seven hundred thousands,” Genghis Khan said, “We only have two-hundred thousand men, but we have to spare several thousands men to fight the Jin dogs. A hundred and fifty thousands against seven hundreds, what would you say? Will we win?”

Guo Jing was completely oblivious of battle strategy, but he was not a coward. Hearing the Great Khan so inquired, he boldly said, “We will win!”

“Of course we will win,” Genghis Khan said, “That day I said I will treat you as my own son. Once Temujin says something, he won’t forget it. You come with me on this expedition to the west; once we have captured Muhammad and Wanyan Honglie, we will go back home and consummate your marriage with my daughter.” This was precisely what he was hoping for, so Guo Jing agreed immediately.

Genghis Khan rode his horse descending that hill, “Summon the soldiers!” he gave his command. Immediately his personal guard sounded the bugle while Genghis Khan speedily went back to his camp.

Along the way men were seen moving around like shadows and horses were galloping back and forth but not a single

voice was heard; a sign of a highly disciplined army. Before the Khan even arrived at the Golden Tent, his thirty thousand soldiers had already neatly arranged on the prairie. The bright moonlight shone on row upon row of spears and blade, making the prairie glittered with silvery gleams.

Genghis Khan entered the Golden Tent and called his secretary, assigning him to write a war declaration. The secretary immediately composed a lengthy letter on a sheet or parchment; then he knelt down in front of the Great Khan to read his letter: "The Heaven has appointed me as the Great Khan over many nations, enlarged my territory by tens of thousands 'li's, helped me to crush countless countries. From the ancient of days there is no one who can be called my equal. Once my thunder strikes, how can you resist? Your country's existence until today depends on three things: unless you send a tribute, the great Mongolian army will ..."

The more Genghis Khan heard, the angrier he became; he kicked that white-bearded secretary upside down and cursed him, "Who are you writing to? Why would Genghis Khan used such flowery words toward a dog king?" Raising his horse whip he struck the secretary's face several times, and then called out, "Listen to me, what I say, you write down."

That secretary gingerly crawled back up, he took a fresh parchment and knelt on the floor, looking intently to the Great Khan's lips.

Genghis Khan walked to the tent entrance and opened up the curtain, looking toward his thirty-thousand strong cavalry. With a low and calm voice he said, "Write it this way, only six characters." He paused for a moment then

shouted, "If you want to fight, then fight!" [ni yao zhan, bian zou zhan - 6 characters]

The secretary was stunned, thinking this kind of official document was so scandalously unusual, but his face was still burning from the whip earlier, how could he dare to object? He wrote those six characters in large letters immediately.

"Put my gold seal on it and send it by the fastest horse," Genghis Khan commanded. Mukhali put the seal on the letter and dispatch a 'qian fu zhang' [leader of a 1000 men unit] with his troops to deliver the letter.

The rest of the assembly learned about the Great Khan's letter, which only had six characters on it, their spirit rose. They heard the hoof beats of the messengers gradually disappear into the prairie, suddenly as if by prior agreement they shouted in one voice, "If you want to fight, then fight!" While outside, the thirty-thousand soldiers cheered, "He hu! He hu! [lit. 'hey! (or 'I say!) Shout!'] It was the Mongolian cavalry's battle cry. As the horses heard their masters shout they neighed loudly while lifting up their front legs. The noise on the prairie that night was deafening, as if they were in an actual battle.

Genghis Khan dismissed his army then he sat alone in his Golden Tent, deep in thought. The chair he was sitting on was taken from the Jins; a dragon snatching a giant pearl was carved on its back, while a pair of ferocious tiger heads was carved on its two armrests. It was the throne that belonged to the Jin emperor.

Genghis Khan reminisced his own youth, which was full of sufferings and difficult times; he recalled his own mother, his wife, his four sons and a beloved daughter; he also remembered his beautiful concubines, his ever-victorious



army, his vast and boundless empire; at last he thought about the upcoming war against a powerful enemy.

Although he was getting old his hearing was as keen as when he was young; he heard a distant mournful cry of a warhorse, then the cry stopped abruptly. He understood it was an old horse with an incurable disease; its master could not bear to see it suffer, so he must have killed the horse. Suddenly he remembered, "I am also getting old, this time I am going to war, will I go back home alive? If I lose my life in the battlefield, my four sons will fight over the Great Khan position; it definitely will be a devastating fight. Ay, I wish I can live forever and not see death."

Even if one was an invincible, fearless warrior; once one's strength gradually faded, one's mind would involuntarily think about 'death'. He could not help but feeling trepidation; his heart trembled with fear.

"I heard in the south there exists a class of people called 'Taoist Priests' who can teach people how to become deity who will never grow old and never see death. I wonder if it is true?" he mused. Clapping his hands twice he called a guard to summon Guo Jing into the tent.

As soon as Guo Jing arrived Genghis Khan asked him about this matter. "I don't know about becoming immortal deity, but there indeed some people who can teach you how to meditate, to do breathing exercise, circulating your energy; in the end, it will prolong your life," Guo Jing answered.

Genghis Khan was delighted, "Do you know such person? Quickly go and find one to see me," he said.

"This kind of people won't come with any casual invitation," Guo Jing replied.

“Correct,” Genghis Khan said, “I am going to send a high official to invite him to the north. Tell me, whom should I invite?”

Guo Jing thought, “Among the Taoist orthodox sects, the Quanzhen is the best. Among the Quanzhen Six Masters, Qiu Daozhang’s [Taoist Priest] martial art is the highest, he is also the most amiable, perhaps he would be willing to come.” Therefore, he mentioned the name of Changchun Zi [Eternal Spring] Qiu Chuji.

Genghis Khan was ecstatic; he summoned his secretary immediately, told him his intention and ordered him to write an imperial letter.

The secretary had a bitter experience earlier that day, he thought for a long time, then finally wrote the imperial letter, “I have something to talk, please come immediately [zhen you shi, bian ji lai].” He followed the Great Khan’s literary style, also only used six characters. He thought this time surely the Great Khan would be pleased with his work. Who would have thought that as soon as Genghis Khan heard the letter, he was angry, and once again his whip hit the secretary’s face.

“I said that way to a dog king, but how can I treat an honorable Taoist Priest the same way?” Genghis Khan scolded, “You must write a long letter, a modest and respectful one.”

The secretary knelt down on the ground and started to compose this imperial letter:

“The Heaven despises the arrogant in the Central Plains, I rule in the northern desert yet I also share the sentiment. I wish for a simple and pure character, shun the extravagance and embrace frugality. Each clothes each meal, along with the livestock in the corral enjoying the

Heaven providence. Regarding the people like newborn babies, raising warriors like brothers, seeking harmony with the earth's element and the living beings.

Training tens of thousands soldiers, dispatching hundreds of military expeditions with me leading in the front; within seven years I have completed great undertakings, uniting six elements into harmony. Not by my own virtue, but because of the Jin's government's lack of patience and the Heaven bestowed its blessing and gave honor to me.

To the south I made an alliance with the Zhao family's Song Dynasty, to the north annexed the Hui Ge, to the east Xia and to the west Yi [name of countries, not sure the exact location]; all acknowledging Genghis Khan's sovereignty, unparalleled since the founding of my Great Mongolia for thousands of years and hundreds of generations. However, my responsibilities are heavy; there is something I lack to maintain peace.

Just like marking the side of the boat where the sword fell into the lake, thinking that the water did not flow [meaning: vanity, something stupid]. I need worthy men to assist me in achieving peace under the sky. I assumed the throne with diligent mind to build a better nation; but three out of nine positions is not filled properly.

I seek Master Teacher Qiu to give guidance, governing nature, nourishing an exhausted mind; applying the strong Taoist virtue, cherishing the respected manners of honorable people of old; embracing the sage's elegant deeds, living above the cliffs and valleys leading an invisible life. Enlightened forefathers have left behind a message: to devote one's life in the way of the warrior.

An ancient saying shows the paths to immortality, every single one worthy of praise. Even after taking up arms, I am

aware that the Master still possesses secret ancient way which I look up to cherish as my own.'

The secretary wrote to this point, he raised his head and asked, "Is it long enough?"

Genghis Khan smiled and said, "Such a nice letter. Enough. Write that I am dispatching a Han high ranking officer, Liu Zhonglu with my greetings to invite him over."

The secretary continued,

'If not for the battle how can one realize he needs the assistance of a secluded expert, that he visited the thatched hut three times? [Background info: Liu Bei visited Zhuge Liang three times before the latter agreed to help the former] The mountains and rivers are vast, yet missed to give a revered welcome.

It is time for me to leave my position. I fast and clean up my body, and I send my officer Liu Zhonglu, riding a plain carriage, enduring a thousand 'li's travel, to respectfully invite the Master to spare a moment from your journey treading immortal path, to brave the desolate desert in distant land, to tend to the affair of common people; and perhaps to give relief to the weary.

I long to go to the immortal place and wish not the immortal Master to spit on my desire. I will be happy to hear just one word of encouragement clearly; sincerely hope the Master would be willing to take the higher road to befriend me and not disappoint the hope of all living beings. Herewith the imperial letter ends; to be read by the appropriate addressee.'

Genghis Khan said, "Good, let it be like that." He rewarded that secretary five 'liang's of gold; he also asked Guo Jing to write a personal letter of invitation to earnestly ask Qiu

Chuji to come over. That very same day he sent Liu Zhonglu with the imperial letter to the south.

[Author's note: Genghis Khan's invitation to Qiu Chuji was based on the original text according to historical documents]

The next day Genghis Khan held a general assembly of all his high-ranking officials discussing the expedition to the west; conferring Guo Jing the title of 'Noyon', placing him in command of a ten-thousand men unit. 'Noyon' was the Mongolian highest official title, normally given only to the Great Khan's close relative or a very senior general. By this time Guo Jing's martial art had advanced immensely, but his military strategy knowledge was next to zero. He had no alternative but went to Jebek, Subotai and other senior generals, asking for some advice. But he was slow and military tactics had an almost infinite variation; how could he learn it all in just a short period of time?

He saw the other generals were busy preparing their soldiers, gathering provisions and choosing their horses and weaponry; everybody was very busy. One hundred and fifty thousands cavalry went on an expedition to the west, going through bitter cold and barren desert lands, the preparation was certainly not a small matter. He had no clue on what to do, hence he simply assigned ten 'qian fu zhang' [leader of a 1000 men unit] under his command to separately handle the preparations and Jebek and Tuolei oftentimes giving their advice to help him out.

A month or so later he still felt his preparation to be inadequate. He realized it was beyond him to command his troops. To attack a strong army of a million using the '18-Dragon Subduing Palms' or even the Nine Yin Manual would not be possible. If he issued a wrong order even for only one time, he would be defeated by the enemy. Not only

Genghis Khan's reputation would be marred, but the lives of ten thousand men would be jeopardized as well.

That day he was seriously contemplating to see the Great Khan and resign from his position; he was willing to be a low ranking soldier under somebody else's command, fighting the enemy as an individual, when suddenly his second-in-command came to report that more than a thousand Han people were waiting outside, they were seeking an audience with him.

Guo Jing was delighted, he thought, "Qiu Daozhang has arrived this soon?" Hastily he went out his tent to welcome the visitor. To his surprised however, he saw on the prairie stood a group of people dressed as beggars. Three men rushed forward and bowed to greet him; turned out they were the Beggar Clan's Lu Youjiao, along with Jian and Liang Zhanglao [Elders].

"Have you heard anything about Miss Huang Rong?" Guo Jing anxiously asked.

"Xiao Ren [lit. little/lowly person] had anxiously waited for any news, but the Bangzhu's whereabouts is still unknown. We heard Sir ['guan ren', lit. government officer] is commanding a troop on the expedition to the west. We come to offer our assistance," Lu Youjiao answered.

Guo Jing was greatly surprised, "How did you know?"

"The Great Khan sent a messenger inviting Qiu Chuji, Priest Qiu; we heard it from the Quanzhen people," Lu Youjiao replied.

Guo Jing was silent for half a day, staring blankly toward the clouds on the southern horizon, he thought, "The Beggar Clan has eyes and ears all over the world, yet they don't know Rong'er's whereabouts. I am afraid her being in

danger is more likely than not.” Thinking about Huang Rong his eyes turned red involuntarily. He assigned his second-in-command to help the newcomers settled down while he himself went to inform the Great Khan.

“Good,” Genghis Khan said, “Place them under your command.”

When Guo Jing conveyed his intention to resign, Genghis Khan was angry, “Who can fight a battle as soon as they are born? Nobody can. After fighting several battles you will pick up. You grew up with me, what are you afraid of? How could Genghis Khan’s son-in-law not go to war?”

Guo Jing did not dare to say another word. He returned to his tent with an anxious face. Lu Youjiao asked him what the matter was, and then tried to console him. When evening came Lu Youjiao came to his tent and said, “If I knew it would be this way, Xiao Ren would have brought ‘Sun Tzu’s Art of War’, or ‘Tai Gong’s Summary of Military Strategy’ from the south; then everything will be all right.”

It suddenly dawned on Guo Jing that he had the ‘Wumu’s Legacy’ by his side. It was a military manual; how could he forget about it? Right away he took the book out from his clothes pouch, and then read it by the lantern light all night long through the next day, stopping only because he felt tired.

This book contained all kinds of military strategy; from reconnaissance, planning an attack, defense strategy, to military training, officer management, troop disposition, field operation, as well as safety and danger situation overview and escape strategy, all were discussed in details.

That day Guo Jing had browsed through it on the boat at Yuanjiang, he did not pay too much attention. But this time he needed military guidance, so he read until he had a good

grasp of what was written. When he did not understand any part of the book, he would invite Lu Youjiao to ask his advice. Lu Youjiao would answer, "Right now Xiao Ren does not understand, but let me think about it." He would leave Guo Jing's tent only for a moment then came back with a very detailed explanation. Guo Jing was delighted and would ask him more questions. Strangely, Lu Youjiao would always not able to answer immediately; he always asked for some time to think, but then afterwards would always come up with answers no matter how difficult the problem was. At first Guo Jing did not notice, but after several days this answer-finding-process repeated, he could not help but feeling suspicious.

One evening Guo Jing picked a character from the book and asked him what it meant. Lu Youjiao said he wasn't clear about that, so he needed sometime to think about it, then he went out the tent. Guo Jing thought, "The book is difficult, it's all right if you need some time to ponder its meaning; but it is only a character, how could you not know its meaning?"

Although holding a position of general, Guo Jing was still very young and he still had a childish character. As soon as Lu Youjiao exited his tent he followed immediately. He stealthily hid among the tall grass wanting to know Lu Youjiao's secret. He saw Lu Youjiao entered a tiny tent, and in just a short while he went out the tent again. Guo Jing hastily went back to his own tent. Lu Youjiao went in and said, "Xiao Ren has thought about it." Then he proceeded by explaining the character's correct pronunciation and its meaning.

Guo Jing smiled, "Lu Zhanglao, you have an expert master; why don't you invite your master to see me?"

Lu Youjiao was startled, "I don't," he said.



Guo Jing grabbed his hand and smiled, "We will go out and see." He pulled his hand and went out the tent, walked toward that tiny tent he saw earlier.

Outside that tiny tent two Beggar Clan members were standing on guard duty. As soon as they saw Guo Jing they coughed lightly. Guo Jing noticed their coughs he let Lu Youjiao's hand go and darted toward the tent. As soon as he lifted the tent's entrance he saw the rear part of the tent fluttered a little bit. Definitely someone has just gone out the tent. Guo Jing rushed forward and lifted up the tent, but he only saw tall grass, not a single human's shadow was to be seen. He was perplexed, was silent for a while.

Guo Jing turned around and asked Lu Youjiao, but Lu Youjiao said the tent was his, nobody else lived there.

Guo Jing did not give up, he kept asking Lu Youjiao difficult questions from the 'Wumu's Legacy', but from now on Lu Youjiao would wait for the next day before he could answer his questions.

Guo Jing knew the person in that tent did not have any ill intention, only did not want to see him. Guo Jing decided that person must be an expert from the Jianghu, and it would be difficult to deal with people like that, so he put this matter aside temporarily.

He studied the book in the evening then trained his soldiers during the day according to method he learned from the book. The Mongolian cavalry was used to fight an open battle, now they had to train battle formations; they were having a very difficult time. But an order is an order, they did not dare to disobey, so they had no choice and trained hard.

Another month had passed; Genghis Khan's army and its logistic were ready. Guo Jing managed to train his ten

thousand soldiers in all eight battle formations: 'tian fu' [high as the sky], 'di zai' [strong as the earth], 'feng yang' [scattered like a wind], 'yun chui' [dangling like a cloud], 'long fei' [flying dragon], 'hu yi' [winged tiger], 'niao xiang' [soaring bird], and 'she pan' [coiling snake]; which they have mastered skillfully.

These eight formations were originally created by Zhuge Liang based on ancient methods; when they got to Yue Fei's hand, he added many changes and variations. When Yue Fei was young, he went to war under Zong Ze who said, "Your bravery, wisdom and skill have exceeded those of the ancient times; however, in a real battle we can't predict everything." He was referring to the troop disposition method. Yue Fei answered, "In a real battle, the art of war does not change. Whoever manages to utilize its wonder will save their own hearts and minds." Zong Ze could not help but agree to what he said. Later on Yue Fei led many other troop movements. He was aware that he could not always follow certain method, yet he still trained his officers and soldiers according to these methods. Only when it came to the real battle he executed his plan dynamically, thus had defeated countless enemies. This process was also recorded in the 'Wumu's Legacy' book.

One particular day the weather was clear and the air was fresh, the sky stretched out for tens of thousands miles, blue like it was fresh from the laundry. The one hundred and fifty thousand Mongolian cavalry were arranged in row after row on the prairie. Genghis Khan offered a sacrifice to the heaven and earth, making a vow before going into battle. Toward all his generals he said, "Stone has no skin, but there is a limit to human's life. My hair and beard have all turned white. This time I go to war, don't know if I am going back home alive. My concubine has reminded me last

night, and I think she was right. I have to assign one of my sons today to lift high my banner after I am gone.”

The generals had fought hundreds of battle, following Genghis Khan’s attacks to the east and expeditions to the west. His white hair had been gray. Suddenly hearing the Great Khan was going to appoint his successor, they were all surprised and delighted at the same time. All eyes gazed toward his face, waiting for him to say his successor’s name.

Genghis Khan said, “Jochi, you are my eldest son, tell me, whom should I appoint?” Jochi’s heart skipped a beat. He was very capable, had rendered the most service, besides, he was the eldest son. He had always thought that when his father king died, naturally the position would fall into his lap. Now that the Great Khan suddenly asked, he did not know how to reply.

Genghis Khan’s second son, Chagatai, was like a raging fire. He did not live harmoniously with his eldest brother. Hearing his father king asking his brother, he opened his mouth, “He wants Jochi to speak, what order will he receive? How can we let this Mergid bastard rule over us?”

Actually when Genghis Khan was young, his army was weak; as a result his wife was captured by their enemy, the Mergids. After several years in captivity, his wife was taken back, but by that time she had already given birth to Jochi. Genghis Khan accepted this fact with an open mind; he regarded Jochi as his own son.

Listening to his own brother’s insult Jochi could not hold his patience any longer, he charged forward, grabbing Chagatai’s chest, shouted, “Father King had never regarded me as an outsider, how dare you insulted me? What skill do you have that I don’t? You are nothing more than an irritable hot-tempered arrogant man. Let’s go out

and have a duel; if I lost to you in archery, I will rip my own thumb. If I lost to you in martial arts, I will throw myself on the ground and never get up!" Turning his head toward Genghis Khan he said, "Father King, please give your order." Two brothers grabbed each other's chest, ready to have a duel right then and there.

The rest of the generals stepped forward to separate them; Bourchu pulled Jochi's hand, while Mukhali held Chagatai's hand.

Genghis Khan was silent; he remembered his own disgrace in his youth that he was not even able to defend his wife's honor, which had caused today's dispute. The generals all blamed Chagatai for bringing up past events and hurt their parents' hearts.

"Both of you, drop it!" finally Genghis Khan said, "Jochi is my eldest son; I will always love him no matter what. I forbid anyone to speak bad about him."

Chagatai let Jochi go, he said, "Jochi is very capable, everybody knows that. But in term of generosity and benevolence, he is inferior to the third brother, Ogedei. I vote for Ogedei."

"Jochi, what do you say?" Genghis Khan asked.

Jochi could see the unfavorable situation; he knew his hope to be the Great Khan was shattered. He had always had good relationship with his third brother; he knew the third brother was kindhearted, certainly would not do him any harm in the future, therefore, he said, "Very well, I also support Ogedei."

The fourth prince Tuolei did not challenge that nomination, Ogedei was about to decline; but Genghis Khan said, "You don't need to decline. Your battle skill is inferior to your two

elder brothers, but you treat people kindly. When you become the Great Khan in the future, all princes and generals won't fight each other. We the Mongolian people will have no enemy as long as we don't fight each other. What are we anxious about then?"

That day Genghis Khan threw a big feast in celebration of the newly appointed crown prince. All the troops, from the generals to the soldiers drank until very late that night. Guo Jing went back to his tent a little tipsy. He was just about to take out his clothes to sleep when suddenly one of his officers came rushing in, gave him this report, "'Fu Ma Ye' [Master Consort], it's not good; the First Prince and the Second Prince were drunk. Each took his troops to kill each other."

Guo Jing was stunned, quickly said, "Inform the Great Khan!"

"The Great Khan is also drunk, we couldn't wake him up," the officer replied.

Guo Jing knew both Jochi and Chagatai had loyal followers, the troops under their flags were ferocious; if they killed each other the Mongolian army's strength would be hurt considerably. They were having a brawl in the Great Khan's presence earlier, but this time both were drunk; he had the urge to help, but how could he separate them? He was lost at what to do, pacing back and forth inside his tent while tapping his own forehead, musing, "If only Rong'er is here, she would know what to do." He heard a distant battle cry, looked like both troops were about to kill each other.

Guo Jing was getting more anxious than ever; but suddenly Lu Youjiao rushed in and handed him a piece of paper with this message, "Use 'coiled snake' to cut off two armies, then use 'winged tiger' to capture those who refuse to

surrender.” By that time Guo Jing had mastered the ‘Wumu’s Legacy’ from top to bottom. As soon as he saw these two lines of characters his mind was enlightened. He shouted, “How could I be so stupid? What’s the use of reading the military strategy book?” Immediately he gave orders for his own troops to move.

The discipline among the Mongolian army was very strict; even though all the officers and soldiers were drunk once the order was given, they armed themselves and mounted their horse; in a very short time had formed a neat battle formation.

The drums were sounded three times, the bugle was blown, the troops under Guo Jing’s command started to move toward the northeast. Several li’s later his scout came back reporting that the First and the Second Princes’ troops had started to battle each other; their ‘He hu! He hu!’ shouts were heard from afar.

Guo Jing was anxious, “I am afraid I come one step too late and not able to prevent this big calamity.” Hastily he waved his hand to give orders; his ten thousand men divided itself, the right-hand ‘hou tian’ [rear sky]’s three axes moved forward, the right-hand ‘hou di’ [rear earth]’s three axes moved toward the tail; the right ‘hou tian’ charged, the right ‘hou di’ charged, moved toward northwest and northeast they occupied the right-hand position. Their corresponding left-hand teams did the same and occupied the left-hand position; while Guo Jing’s big banner moved in the center, followed by a ‘coiled snake’ formation fiercely broke through the front.

Jochi and Chagatai had each brought their twenty-thousand men, fighting with long saber in their hands. Guo Jing’s ‘coiled snake’ suddenly charged in between still

maintaining their neat formation. The battling troops were startled, they scattered slightly disorderly.

Chagatai's loud voice was heard, "Who's there? Who's there? Are you coming to help me or to help this bastard Jochi?"

Guo Jing paid no attention, his command flag waved, his teams moved around, the 'coiled snake' changed into 'winged tiger' immediately, the four smaller groups left-hand and right-hand 'qian tian' [front sky] occupied the front position, the rest of the groups enveloped Chagatai's troops from both sides, their corresponding left groups outflanked Jochi's troops on the other side.

By this time Chagatai could see Guo Jing's banner clearly; angrily he swore, "I knew from the start the southern barbarian is not a good person." He gave an order to his troops to kill Guo Jing's. But those tiger's wings contained subtle variations; each was very powerful; it was the formation Han Xin used to crush Xiang Yu at Gai Xia. It was called, "Ten principles to surround the enemy" in the military strategy books. It was said to have a power of surrounding the enemy ten times stronger, the principle of small number surrounding many using ever changing movements.

Chagatai's troops saw Guo Jing's small groups came and went continually, they did not know the exact number of the enemy and their hearts trembled with fear. In a short moment Chagatai's twenty-thousand troops had been cut off, each group could not help the other.

The fight against Jochi's troops took a different turn since their fighting spirit was already weakened. First, it was their fellow countrymen, more than half of them were good friends to each other. Second, they were afraid of the Great

Khan's wrath. As soon as Guo Jing small groups surrounded them in confusing movements, they lost their will to fight.

Among the troop movement Guo Jing's loud voice could be heard, "We are all Mongolian brothers, no need to kill each other. Quickly put down your sabers, spears, bows and arrows to avoid the Great Khan's beheadings." Almost all officers and soldiers listened to his plea; immediately they dismounted their horses and threw their weapons to the ground.

Chagatai and about a thousand of his loyal followers charged ferociously toward Guo Jing's troops, but three drumbeats were heard, eight groups of riders came surrounding them from all directions; they carried horse-tripping ropes. One by one the thousand troops fell down their horsebacks. From those eight groups, four or five soldiers surrounded one of Chagatai's loyal followers. They were forced to sit on the ground with their hands tied behind their backs.

Jochi saw how Guo Jing's troops routed Chagatai, he could not help but feeling scared but happy. He was about to move forward to talk to Guo Jing when suddenly the horn sounded again, Guo Jing's front teams moved backward and the rear teams moved forward, very soon Jochi was surrounded on all directions.

Jochi had an extensive battle experience, but he had never seen anything like this. Hastily ordered his men to attack, but Guo Jing's ten thousand men split into twelve smaller groups, did not charge forward, but moved backward instead. Jochi was marveled; he did not know that these twelve groups were:

'da hei zi' [black darkness, 11pm - 1am, the first hour],  
'po di chou' [worn out enemy, 1 - 3am, the second hour],



‘zuo tu yin’ [dashing to the left, 3 – 5am, the third hour],  
‘qing she mao’ [green snake, 5 – 7am, the fourth hour],  
‘cui xiong chen’ [terrible devastation, 7 – 9am, the fifth hour],  
‘qian chong si’ [charge forward, 9 – 11am, the sixth hour],  
‘da chi wu’ [great scarlet, 11am – 1pm, the seventh hour],  
‘xian feng wei’ [first tip (of the tool/weapon), 1 – 3pm, the eighth hour],  
‘you ji shen’ [right-hand strike, 3 – 5pm, the ninth hour],  
‘bai yun you’ [white cloud, 5 – 7pm, the tenth hour],  
‘jue sheng xu’ [sure victory, 7 – 9pm, the eleventh hour],  
and ‘hou wei hai’ [rear guard, 9 – 11pm, the twelfth hour ],  
according to the twelve two-hour periods of the day; with strange variations, swiftly moved back and forth.

These twelve groups moved around, the right-hand groups charged to the left, the left-hand groups strike to the right; Jochi’s troops were confused. Less than the time to eat a bowl of rice later Jochi and his men were also surrounded and captured.

Jochi remembered when all of them were kids he had whipped Guo Jing half-dead. Chagatai also remembered he let his dogs loose and bite Guo Jing really bad. Both were afraid that Guo Jing would seek revenge; they sobered up immediately. They were also really scared that their father king would punish them severely.

After capturing these two people Guo Jing thought that as an outsider he had interfered in this sibling rivalry; he was not sure if his action might result in disaster or good luck. He was thinking of discussing this matter over with Ogedei and Tuolei when suddenly he heard loud horn sound; amidst the flickering torches the Great Khan’s nine big banners came galloping fast.

Genghis Khan had sobered up from wine, he received the report that his two sons were about to kill each other. He was startled and angrily jumped out of his bed. Without wearing clothes or armor, with his hair unkempt he jumped on his horse and sped to the prairie.

When he came near, he saw his sons' troops sat on the ground, with Guo Jing's troops standing around, guarding them. His two sons, although they were still sitting on the horsebacks, but each were surrounded by eight of Guo Jing's men wielding unsheathed blades in their hands. He was very surprised.

Guo Jing stepped forward and knelt down on the ground, reporting everything. Realizing that a major disaster had been unexpectedly thwarted, Genghis Khan's delight was unspeakable. He came rushing in thinking that two Mongolian armies had fought each other, the casualty must be serious; his two sons might be dead already. Who would have thought that his two sons were alive and well, three armies were intact. Of course he was delighted.

Immediately he called a general assembly of all the princes and generals. He scolded Jochi and Chagatai, and heavily rewarded Guo Jing and his men. He said to Guo Jing, "Do you still say that you cannot lead troops to war? Your merit in this matter alone can easily dwarf the war against the Jin country. If we cannot destroy the enemy's city wall today, we can always come back tomorrow and try again. But if my sons were dead, how can we make them alive again?"

Guo Jing took the rewards, but divided the gold, silver and livestock to his troops. There was a thunderous cheering and applause among his troops that day. All generals came to congratulate him on this great merit.

After sending off the guests, Guo Jing took out the note given to him by Lu Youjiao. He examined it carefully, the handwriting was shoddy, most likely it was Lu Youjiao's handwriting, but he was suspicious, "Although I have trained my troops in 'coiled snake' and 'winged tiger' formations, but I have never mentioned these names to Lu Zhanglao. The difficult parts of the book that I asked him for advice also do not have anything to do with this battle formations. How did he know? Did he read my military strategy book without my knowledge?"

Right away he invited Lu Youjiao into his tent. "Lu Zhanglao, if you like to read this military strategy book, I will gladly lend it to you."

Lu Youjiao smiled, "A poor beggar like me will not become a general in my lifetime; leading a whole bunch of little beggars also did not need to use the art of war. What use will the military strategy book for me?"

Guo Jing pointed his finger to the note, "Then how did you know about the 'coiled snake' and 'winged tiger' formations?"

"Sir has mentioned it to Xiao Ren, have you forgotten?" Lu Youjiao said. Guo Jing knew he was not telling the truth. The more he thought about it the more he was perplexed; but he was not sure what did Lu Youjiao hide.

The next day Genghis Khan held another general assembly. The vanguard was under Chagatai and Ogedei's command. The left flank was under Jochi's command, while the right was under Guo Jing's. Each of the vanguard, left and right units were thirty thousand men strong. Genghis Khan and Tuolei commanded over sixty thousand soldiers as the main army. Each soldier rode on one of a pair of horses; they would ride one horse at a time to conserve the horses'

strength. The officers took even more horses. With one hundred and fifty thousand men, they took with them nearly a million horses.

The horns were sounded, the drums were beaten, the noise was deafening. The thirty-thousand strong vanguard cavalry unit started to gallop majestically to the west. The great army moved farther and farther west, entering Khoresm territory with irresistible force. Muhammad's army was bigger, but they were not the Mongolian's army match. Guo Jing led his unit destroying cities and killing the enemies, he had rendered not a few merits.

**End of Chapter 36.**

## Chapter 37 - Descending From the Sky

Translated by Frans Soetomo



*From all over the camp officers and soldiers alike came to the command tent to watch the*

*marvelous sight. The soldiers joined strength to raise the ice column. Under the bright torch light they saw Ouyang Feng showing his teeth with an angry look on his face, his hands and feet splayed wide. He was frozen inside the ice column and could not move even one bit. The officers and soldiers erupted in thunderous applause.*

One day Guo Jing's troops pitched a camp by a riverbank. In the evening Guo Jing was reading the military strategy book when suddenly there was a commotion outside his tent. The curtain to his tent was opened, and somebody was forcing his way in. The guards outside shouted, trying to stop him, but that person moved his hand and one by one the guards fell to the ground. That man lifted up his head and laughed. Under the bright candlelight Guo Jing could see his face clearly; it was none other than the Western Poison Ouyang Feng, whom Guo Jing had searched high and low for tens of thousands 'li's. Unexpectedly he appeared here in a foreign land, Guo Jing was pleasantly surprised. He jumped up from his seat and called out, "Where is Miss Huang?"

"I was just about to ask you," Ouyang Feng replied, "Where is that little girl? Quickly hand her over to me!"

Hearing this, Guo Jing's delight was beyond measure, "So Rong'er is still alive; not only that, but she managed to escape from his evil hands too," he thought.

"Where is that little girl?" Ouyang Feng sternly asked again.

"She went with you in Jiangnan, then what happened? She ... is she well? You haven't killed her, I really should thank you! I ... I must thank you," Guo Jing said. He was sobbing from overwhelming delight.

Ouyang Feng knew Guo Jing was not able to lie, but all signs indicated that Huang Rong was with him; how could he be so oblivious, Ouyang Feng had to re-think his assumptions. He sat cross-legged on the carpet in Guo Jing's tent.

Guo Jing wiped out his tears, then unsealed his guards' acupoints and asked them to deliver 'ru jiu lao cha' [lit. milk wine cream tea - don't know exactly what kind of drink it was].

Ouyang Feng drank a bowl of 'ma ru jiu' [horse milk wine], he said, "Dumb kid, I might as well speak frankly with you. That little girl was with me since we were at the Temple of the Iron Spear in Jiaxing, unexpectedly several days later she escaped from me."

Guo Jing cheered ecstatically, he said, "She is so smart, once she decided to escape, she will find a way to escape. How did she do it?"

Ouyang Feng full of hatred said, "At the Cloud Manor, by Lake Tai ... Bah!" he spat, "Why would I tell you? In short, she ran away."

Guo Jing knew Ouyang Feng was a conceited man; he did not expect him to personally reveal his own setback, so he stopped asking question. Knowing Huang Rong was alive and well he was elated, he kept shouted, "Wonderful! Just wonderful!"

Ouyang Feng was annoyed, "What do you mean wonderful?" he asked, "After she escaped I was hot on her trail; several times I almost caught her, but every time she managed to get away relying on her craftiness. But I always followed her closely, she could not run away to the Peach Blossom Island. I chased her to the Mongolian border then suddenly her trail disappeared. I thought she must be

hiding in your troops; therefore, I am standing on my guard to prevent her from running away again."

Hearing that Huang Rong was in Mongolia, Guo Jing was pleasantly surprised, "Have you seen her?" he asked.

Ouyang Feng was indignant, "If I saw her, wouldn't I capture her?" he said, "Day and night I stayed in your troops keeping my eyes open, I did not even see this little girl's shadow. Dumb kid, what kind of crafty trick are you playing?"

Guo Jing was silent for half a day, he asked, "Day and night you are in my troops? How come I did not recognize you?"

Ouyang Feng smiled, "I am just a lowly western area soldier in your 'tian qian' [front sky] group; you are the commander-in-chief, how would you recognize me?" In the Mongolian army, there were many prisoners of war who were then given jobs as soldiers; Ouyang Feng was from the west, once he intermingled with other soldiers from the same region, it was really not easy to single him out.

Listening to him Guo Jing was startled, he thought, "If he meant me harm, I would be dead by now." He muttered, "Why did you say Rong'er is in my army?"

"You captured the Great Khan's two sons, you destroyed cities and crushed the enemies, if not by that little girl's direction, how can a dumb kid like you accomplish all that?" Ouyang Feng replied, "But that little girl has never shown herself up; it's really strange. I have no choice but forcing you to hand her over to me."

Guo Jing smiled, "If Rong'er is willing to show herself up that will be my earnest desire. Just think: would I hand her over to you?"



"Fine," Ouyang Feng said, "You are not willing to hand her over to me, I'll find my way to get hold of her. You have great authority as the commander of tens of thousands soldiers, but in Ouyang Feng's eye, hey, hey ... outside or inside this tent, I can come and go as I like; who can stop me?"

Guo Jing nodded, silently agreed to what he said.

"Dumb kid, what do you say we make an agreement?" Ouyang Feng asked.

"What agreement?" Guo Jing replied with a question.

Ouyang Feng said, "You tell me her hiding place, I guarantee not to harm even a single strand of her hair. But if you don't want to tell me, I will find her sooner or later anyway. When that time comes, humph, it doesn't matter anymore, does it?"

Guo Jing knew Ouyang Feng was smart and resourceful; as long as Huang Rong was not on the Peach Blossom Island, there would come a day when she would be captured by him. Ouyang Feng was not making an empty threat. He hesitated for a moment before finally saying, "All right, I am going to make an agreement with you, but not like what you said."

"What do you mean?" Ouyang Feng asked.

"Mr. Ouyang," Guo Jing said, "Your martial art is a lot higher than mine, but I am a lot younger than you are. One day you will grow old and your strength will be gone; you won't be able to defeat me anymore." Before, Guo Jing always called him 'Uncle Ouyang' but since he killed Guo Jing's five benevolent masters, Guo Jing's hatred was as deep as the ocean; therefore, he could not say the word 'Uncle' anymore.

It never occurred to Ouyang Feng that someday he would grow old and lose his strength; this revelation sent a chill to his heart, "What this dumb said is actually not dumb at all," he thought. "What then?" he asked.

"There is very deep enmity between us," Guo Jing said, "I can't leave this enmity un-avenged. Even if you fly to the sky, there will come a day when I will come looking for you."

Ouyang Feng lifted up his head and laughed loudly, "Before I grow old and lose my strength, I will kill you!" As soon as he finished talking he bent his knees slightly, and thrust both palms forward with an earth-shattering force.

By this time Guo Jing had mastered the 'yi jin duan gu pian' [changing muscle forging bone] from the Nine Yin Manual. Also he had trained himself in the part that Reverend Yideng had translated; his internal energy had enjoyed quite a bit of improvement. He leaned his body slightly to avoid the attack, and at the same time counterattack with 'jian long zai tian' [seeing dragon in the field].

Ouyang Feng received Guo Jing's attack head-on, thinking that he was already familiar with this '18-Dragon Subduing Palms'. Besides, Guo Jing was Hong Qigong's disciple, so his strength should be a lot less than Hong Qigong. Hence, he did not put too much energy on his defense. But unexpectedly when their palms met he was shaken. If his internal energy was not strong enough, he would be seriously injured. He was being careless and nearly lost in Guo Jing's hand. He was shocked, "Perhaps this kid will already catch up with me before I grow old and lose my strength" he thought. Quickly he sent his left palm out.

Guo Jing again leaned sideways to evade, then returned the attack. This time Ouyang Feng did not dare to take it head on, he flicked his hand to redirect Guo Jing's palm. Guo Jing

did not know Ouyang Feng's real intention, he thought Ouyang Feng simply parried his attack, who would have thought that inside that defensive move there was a hidden attack; Guo Jing felt a strong force surging toward his face, there was not enough time to evade, so he was forced to stretch out his right palm to block.

Speaking about internal energy strength, Guo Jing was still one level inferior to Ouyang Feng. The current situation was similar to the day at the imperial palace in Lin'an, inside the cave behind the waterfall; although Guo Jing would be able to hold his ground for a while, but in the end he would suffer a heavy injury or even death.

Ouyang Feng's movement resembled a gourd, enticing the opponent to enter; which Guo Jing did. Ouyang Feng was delighted, but suddenly sensed Guo Jing pulled his right palm slightly, like he was losing his strength. Ouyang Feng sent more force to his palm, pressing harder; who would have thought that Guo Jing's palm slid a little bit and thus avoid being crushed.

Ouyang Feng grunted ferociously, sending all his strength to his palm, thinking, "Today is the day you are going to die."

Seeing the opponent's fingertip swept to his chest, Guo Jing parried by sweeping his left palm horizontally while his right-hand index finger stretched out and fiercely went to Ouyang Feng's 'tai yang' [sun] acupoint. It was the 'Solitary Yang Finger' he saw Reverend Yideng used. However, what he learned was superficial, he only saw the form, but did not know the variations within. In this critical moment instinctively he used mutual hands combat technique.

'Solitary Yang Finger' was the 'Toad Stance's adversary, how could Ouyang Feng not startled when he saw it? He

leaped backward to elude, shouted angrily, "Old Duan Zhixing wants to give me a hard time?"

Unfortunately Guo Jing's finger technique was not the real 'Solitary Yang Finger', hence it could not break the Toad Stance; but Ouyang Feng was scared away, without looking clearly he jumped back in shock. Only afterwards did he remember that the Solitary Yang Finger had an infinite variations; how could after launching an attack Guo Jing retracted his finger? Hence he knew Guo Jing had not learned it in its entirety. Without waiting for Guo Jing to launch the next stance both of his palms, one upward the other downward, one attack the other guarded, moved toward Guo Jing. This attack was so swift that Guo Jing did not have time to think, he simply jumped back to escape. 'Crack!' the small table behind him was smashed by the Western Poison's palms.

Since he was gaining an upper hand, Ouyang Feng continued his attack by successively sending his palms; but suddenly he felt a gust of wind coming from behind, somebody attacked him. Without turning around he sent his left foot kicking backward. Turned out the attacker was also using his leg, so two legs collided, the attacker was thrown backward; luckily his bone was not broken, it looked like he had anticipated Ouyang Feng's counterattack.

Ouyang Feng turned his head around only to see three old beggars standing on the tent's entrance, they were the Beggar Clan's three elders, Lu, Jian and Liang. Lu Youjiao swiftly moved toward Jian and Liang Zhanglao [Elders], then interlinked his arms with theirs. It was the Beggar Clan's technique of combining power to fight a superior enemy using the-weak-subdue-the-strong method. During the Beggar Clan general assembly at Mount Jun to elect the new Bangzhu [Clan Leader] the other day, the Beggar Clan

disciples had formed a human wall, rendering Guo Jing and Huang Rong helpless against them.

Ouyang Feng had never fought these three people, but from his first contact with Lu Youjiao's leg he knew that Lu's internal energy was not weak. The other two beggars looked not much different. If he fight Guo Jing one on one, he was certain he would win; but with the addition of these three stinky beggars he knew things would not end too good for him. He laughed a big laugh and said, "Dumb kid, your martial art has improved tremendously."

He bent his legs and sat on the carpet, totally ignoring Lu Youjiao and the other two beggars. "What kind of agreement you want to make? Let me hear it," he said.

"You want Miss Huang to explain the Nine Yin Manual to you," Guo Jing said, "Whether she is willing to do that or not, it is entirely up to her; you must not harm even a single strand of her hair."

Ouyang Feng laughed, "If she is willing, of course I won't want to harm her in any way. Do you think it is easy to deal with the Old Heretic Huang?" he said, "But if she is not willing, how can it be that I can't use a little bit of persuasion?"

Guo Jing shook his head, "No, you can't."

"Well, you want me to agree to this, what is there for me?" Ouyang Feng asked.

"From now on, if you fall into my hand, I will spare your life three times," Guo Jing replied.

Ouyang Feng stood up, letting out a long laughter. His laugh was supported by a strong internal energy; it

traveled far into the prairie. The horses were disturbed, they neighed and made commotion.

Guo Jing's gaze pierced Ouyang Feng's eyes, with a low voice he said, "This is not funny, and you know it. There will come a day you will fall into my hand."

Although he was laughing Ouyang Feng was actually scared. He realized this kid knew the secret of the Nine Yin Manual, his martial art was improving by leaps and bounds; he really must not underestimate him. While his mouth was laughing, his mind had made a decision. "I, Ouyang Feng, am going to ask you, a stinky kid, for mercy? All right, let's just wait and see," he said with a smile.

Guo Jing extended his hand and said, "Once a gentleman said a word."

Ouyang Feng smiled and replied, "Like a fast horse getting a whip." He also extended his hand and patted Guo Jing's hand three times. This was the way the people of Song Dynasty sealed their agreement; whoever broke it would be despised and disgraced for the rest of his life.

After sealing their agreement Ouyang Feng was about to interrogate Guo Jing on Huang Rong's whereabouts some more, but suddenly with the corner of his eyes he caught a shadow moving outside the tent. That shadow was very swift; Ouyang Feng's heart was stirred, quickly he went out the tent, but did not see anyone. He turned his head and said, "Within ten days I am going to visit you again. We'll see whether you will spare my life, or will I spare yours?" With a loud laughter he moved swiftly, and a sort moment later his laughter was heard dozens of 'zhang's away.

Lu, Jian and Liang three elders looked at each other in astonishment, they thought, "This man's martial art is really

high. He is an extraordinary character, truly in par with our Hong Bangzhu."

Guo Jing then told the three visitors the reason of Ouyang Feng's visit. Lu Youjiao said, "He said Huang Bangzhu is in our army, that's nonsense. If the Huang Bangzhu is here, how could we not know? Besides ..."

Guo Jing sat back down, one hand supporting his cheek. "I actually think what he said is very reasonable. Oftentimes I have a feeling that Miss Huang is by my side; no matter how difficult the problem I am facing, she always gives me a wonderful solution. Only no matter what I think, I still can't see her." Speaking thus his eyes welled up with tears.

Lu Youjiao tried to console him, "Sir, please don't worry, to be separated but for a moment, to be united forever in the future."

"I have offended Miss Huang," Guo Jing said, "I am afraid she won't be willing to see me again. I don't know what I must do to pay for this guilt."

Lu, Jian and Liang three people looked at each other without saying anything.

Guo Jing continued, "Even if she is not willing to talk to me, if only she would let me see her once, I will be very much comforted."

"Sir is tired, better go to bed soon," Jian Zhanglao said, "Tomorrow morning we will discuss how we are going to deal with Ouyang Feng if he stirs up trouble again."

The next morning the army continued their journey to the west. That evening after they pitched camp Lu Youjiao came and said, "Years ago Xiao Ren bought a painting in Jiangnan. I am a rough uneducated man, how could I

comprehend the meaning behind this painting? While Sir is lonely in this army, Sir may enjoy this leisurely.” While speaking he put a roll of painting on the table.

Guo Jing unrolled the painting to take a look, he could not help but feeling astonished. The painting depicted a young maiden with a flower on her hair; she was sitting weaving silk on a loom. Her appearance resembled Huang Rong’s, only she looked distressed; her eyebrows were knitted together and her face looked thin and pale.

Guo Jing looked in surprise for half a day, he saw next to the picture were two lines of poem. The first one read, “Seven looms, in the springtime silkworms spit their raw silk, it is not easy to weave them into silk cloth. Do not use a pair of scissors so recklessly, otherwise the immortal ‘luan’ [a mythical bird] and the phoenix will be separated on two sides of the clothes.” The other one read, “Nine looms, a pair of flowers, a pair of leafs, and a pair of branches. From ancient time a shallow love often parts. From head to toe two hearts are bound together, passing through a strand of silk thread.” These two stanzas resembled the ‘si zhang ji’ [four looms/weaving machines] poem of Ying Gu, but the pain they carried was twice the ‘four looms’ had.

Although it was hard for Guo Jing to interpret the poem, he understood the ‘From ancient time a shallow love often parts’ part. After pondering it for half a day he thought, “This painting must be Rong’er’s handiwork; where did Lu Zhanglao get it from?”

He raised his head to ask, but Lu Youjiao had left early on. Hastily Guo Jing ordered his personal guard to summon him back. Lu Youjiao was persistent with what he said earlier, that he bought that painting at a bookstore in Jiangnan. Even if Guo Jing was ten times dumber, he’d know something was wrong. Lu Youjiao was a straightforward



and rough warrior; how could he stroll into a bookstore and buy a painting? If the painting was a gift, he would throw it away without giving it a second thought. If he did buy it at a bookstore in Jiangnan, how come the maiden in the painting bore a very close resemblance to Huang Rong? But Lu Youjiao was determined not to reveal the truth; there was nothing he could do.

While he was hesitating, Jian Zhanglao walked in and whispered in his ears, "Just now Xiao Ren saw a shadow of a man moving on the tent toward our northeast; it swiftly disappeared without any trace. I am afraid that old scoundrel Ouyang Feng is going to sneak in tonight."

"Good," Guo Jing said, "We, four people will cooperate here to capture him."

"Xiao Ren has an idea," Jian Zhanglao said, "Let's see if Sir will agree."

"Any idea is good," Guo Jing said, "Please tell me."

Jian Zhanglao said, "This is a very ordinary idea: we dig a deep hole here, then we place twenty soldiers with bags of sand waiting outside. If he did not show up, consider him lucky, but if he did, I guarantee he can come but won't be able to leave."

Guo Jing was delighted, he thought that Ouyang Feng was very conceited, never considered others worthy to be looked at. This idea was an old trick, but actually very effective against somebody like him.

The three elders immediately supervised several soldiers to dig a very deep hole. The top of the hole was then covered with a rug, and a light wooden chair was placed on top of the rug. Twenty soldiers with sand bags in their hand were waiting outside the tent.

It was not uncommon for an army to dig holes in the desert, looking for water; so the activity was gone unnoticed.

The set up was completed and Guo Jing waited by the candlelight, reading. But Ouyang Feng did not show up that night. After pitching their camp the next day, again the three elders had some soldiers dug another hole, but again nothing happened that night. Toward the evening of the fourth day Guo Jing heard some strange noise among the tents; his heart was thumping fast. Suddenly there was a rustling noise outside his tent; with a long laugh Ouyang Feng walked inside his tent then casually walked toward the wooden chair.

‘Crack! Crack!’ with a loud noise both the man and the chair fell into the hole. The trap’s depth was about seven, eight ‘zhang’s [70 – 80 feet, about 25 meters], the mouth was narrow. Even if Ouyang Feng’s martial art were higher, how could he jump back up easily? Twenty soldiers swarmed the tent, and forty bags of sand were rapidly poured into the hole, burying Ouyang Feng’s body.

Lu Youjiao burst up in laughter, “Huang Bangzhu predicts like a deity ...” he said.

Jian Zhanglao cast him a glance; Lu Youjiao closed his mouth immediately.

“What Huang Bangzhu?” Guo Jing quickly asked.

“Xiao Ren had a slip of tongue,” Lu Youjiao said, “I mean Hong Bangzhu. If Hong Bangzhu were here, he would have been delighted.”

Guo Jing stared at him, hard. He was about to ask another question when suddenly the soldiers outside his tent were shouting noisily. Guo Jing and the three elders quickly went out the tent to see the soldiers were pointing their fingers

to the ground, shouting loudly. Guo Jing rushed forward to take a look, he saw the ground was rising up gradually, looked like something was trying to come out of the ground. Immediately Guo Jing realized what was going on, "With his excellent martial art Ouyang Feng is drilling the ground, trying to climb up," he said. He commanded a dozen or so of his soldiers to ride their horses and trampled the ground at once.

The weight of the dozens or so soldiers and their horses was heavy enough to trample the raising ground back down. Even though Ouyang Feng's strength was incredible he was not able to penetrate the ground, so the earth was slowly leveled up as before. To everybody surprise, in another location the ground was starting to rise again. The soldiers simply rode their horses to wherever the ground rose and trampled it flat.

Not too long afterwards the ground no longer rose anywhere. They assumed Ouyang Feng had lost his strength or even died of suffocation. Guo Jing ordered the soldiers to dismount their horses and dug the ground. It was already the first hour [between 11pm - 1 am]; the soldiers lifted up their torches high, they stood in a circle surrounding the digging.

About a dozen soldiers used spades and shovels dug a little over a 'zhang' before finally they saw Ouyang Feng was standing inside the sand. This location was a few 'zhang's away from the tent. Although the sand was soft, yet by using his bare hands Ouyang Feng was able to dig underground just like a mole. It was a demonstration of a very strong internal energy, truly extraordinary. The soldiers were astounded but full of admiration; they lifted him up and laid him on the ground.

Lu Youjiao probed him for breath, but felt his chest was still warm; he ordered the soldiers to get some iron chain to tie him up, for fear that Ouyang Feng would create problem once he was awake. Who would have thought that when he was crawling in the sand Ouyang Feng was unable to excavate his way upward because of the horses, he feigned death, thinking he would escape later. He suspended his own breath, and did not see Lu Youjiao stood beside him. But as soon as Lu Youjiao shouted his order to take some chain, Ouyang Feng leaped up, gave a loud shout, and grabbed Lu Youjiao's main artery on his right hand.

It was a sudden change; a corpse went back to live. Everybody was shocked. Guo Jing rushed forward, his left hand pressed the 'tao dao' [pleasing talk] acupoint on Ouyang Feng's back, while his right hand attacked the 'ji zhong' [spine's central] acupoint on Ouyang Feng's waist. These two were two main acupoints on the back; if Ouyang Feng was not buried under the ground, half-dead, and was very tired, how could he let his main acupoints be sealed that easily?

Ouyang Feng was startled, he swung his hand backward trying to fend off, but his acupoints were numb. He realized Guo Jing did not use his full strength; otherwise his internal organs would be shaken. Moreover, his hands and feet were weak; even if Guo Jing did not seal his acupoints still he would not be Guo Jing's match. He was forced to let Lu Youjiao go and stood still.

"Mr. Ouyang," Guo Jing said, "May I ask did you see Miss Huang?"

"I saw her shadow, that's why I came looking for her," Ouyang Feng replied.

"Did you see her clearly?" Guo Jing pressed.

Ouyang Feng hatefully said, "If that sly little girl is not in this, I bet you wouldn't think of some clever trap like this."

Guo Jing was silent for half a day, then he finally said, "You can go. I spare your life." His right hand lightly waved, sending Ouyang Feng tumbled down a little over a 'zhang'. He was afraid if he freed him in close proximity, Ouyang Feng would suddenly execute a counterattack.

Ouyang Feng turned around and said coldly, "I've never used any weapon dealing with a junior; but you are secretly helped by that sly girl of yours. She is very crafty. What happened to me tonight was the proof. I will be back within ten days with my snake staff. You have seen the vipers with your own eyes. Just watch out." As soon as he finished speaking, Ouyang Feng flew away.

As Guo Jing looked at his shadow swiftly disappearing into the dark towards the north a chill crept up his spine. Remembering the venomous snake staff and the exquisiteness of Ouyang Feng's stick technique very well; he could not refrain from feeling apprehensive. Although he had trained extensively in weaponry from the Six Freaks of Jiangnan, among those he had mastered none would be adequate to fight someone Ouyang Feng's caliber; while it certainly was not a good idea to face the snake staff with his bare hands.

He was at a loss for a while; lifting up his eyes toward the sky he saw white snow flakes floating down in the darkness. Not long after he returned to his tent the weather turned cold. His soldiers started bonfires and got their horses inside their tents to protect them against the bitter cold weather outside.

The Beggar Clan people did not have any fur coats with them; with the sudden change in temperature they were

forced to circulate their internal energy to keep their bodies warm. Right away Guo Jing ordered his troops to slaughter some sheep and make some leather coats. They were not as good as the tanned leather coats, but they helped the beggars to fight the cold.

The next day the weather turned even colder; the snow on the ground had turned into ice. The Khoresm's army took advantage of this cold weather and made an attack; luckily Guo Jing had already anticipated this possibility. Using the 'flying dragon' formation they scored a big victory over the enemy; chasing them far into the night towards the snow-covered northern plains.

There was an ancient poem about the expedition to the west amidst a bitter cold weather: "The army general did not take out their golden armor at night. In the middle of the night the army set aside their spears, the wind blowing like a cutting knife. The sweats on the horses' mane rose up like steam in the snow, the five-petal flower pattern on the (money) coin felt like ice, inside the tent the liquid ink to write letters froze over."

Then there was another poem: "The soldiers and prisoners squeezed in the same station, the bones on the battlefield wrapped around the grassroots. Blowing wind like the blade of a sword sweeping wide, the horses' hoofs got away from the frozen sand and stone."

Guo Jing grew up in the northern desert, he was used to the bitter cold weather, but he remembered if Huang Rong were really in his army, she was raised in the south (Jiangnan), would she be able to withstand this bitter cold weather? His anxiety multiplied. The next several nights he roamed around the tents without alerting anybody; quietly investigate each and every tent, but not even Huang Rong's shadow was to be seen.

Returning to his command-center tent, he saw Lu Youjiao was supervising the soldiers to dig another hole. "This Ouyang Feng is sly and alert, first time he fell into the trap, how can he fall for the second time?" Guo Jing asked.

"He would certainly think that we are going to prepare some other trap, but he would not expect us to prepare the same trap," Lu Youjiao said, "It is called 'a void inside a solid, and solid in an emptiness,' an indiscernible combination of void and solid."

Guo Jing cast a glance toward him, he thought, "You said leading little beggars did not need to use any military strategy, but you remembered the content of the military strategy book very well."

Lu Youjiao continued, "But this man must have thought of a way to escape the sand piling on top of him, therefore, we must strive for a different method. We are going to use boiling water to soak him up."

Guo Jing saw dozens of soldiers preparing about twenty big iron pots outside his tent. The soldiers used hatchets to break the ice and feed them into the pots using shovels. "Won't he die of scalding?" Guo Jing asked.

"Sir had made an agreement with him that if he falls into your hands you will spare his life three times. But this time if he die from scalding, he won't die in your hands, even if you want to spare his life you are powerless, therefore, it can't be said that you break your promise," Lu Youjiao reasoned.

Not too long afterwards the hole was dug, the mouth was covered with a rug, and a light wooden chair was placed on it. Outside the tent the soldiers were busy adding fuel to the fire underneath the pots; the ice were slowly melting into water, but the weather was just too cold; the water on the

surface was slowly turning back into ice. "More heat, more heat!" Lu Youjiao urged.

Suddenly on the snow outside a shadow came lightning fast; Ouyang Feng with the stick in his hand had arrived on the tent's entrance. "Dumb kid, whatever trap you prepared, your grandfather is not scared!" he said while flying toward the chair to sit.

Elders Lu, Jian, and Liang did not expect Ouyang Feng would arrive this soon; the ice inside the pots were barely melted into water; a very cold water, which certainly would not scald people to death. The water was even too cold to take a shower. They saw Ouyang Feng moved toward the chair, they could not help but feeling disappointed.

'Crack!' one more time with loud cursing the man and the chair fell into the hole. This time there were no sand bags around. With his level of martial art it was an easy matter for Ouyang Feng to climb back up. The three elders were helpless, they were afraid Guo Jing would be injured, "Sir, get out of the tent, quick!" they shouted in panic.

But suddenly somebody shouted from behind the tent, "Pour the water!" As soon as Lu Youjiao heard this voice, without hesitation he shouted, "Pour the water!" The soldiers lifted up the pots and poured the water into the hole.

Ouyang Feng was about to jump back up when the water from the first pot was poured over his head. He was shocked and was forced to fall back down. He used his snake staff as a brace against the bottom of the hole, and tried to jump up for the second time. This time he was prepared, he was sure he would not be forced to fall down by pouring water. Unexpectedly to him the weather was really cold, as the water left the pot it froze up immediately;



as Ouyang Feng was jumping up, the water around his feet was turning into ice. With his incredible strength he tried to jump up, but 'Bonk!' he felt a shot of pain as his head was hit by a block of ice. He tried hard to kick around, but his feet were firmly buried in ice, he could not even move them. He was extremely shocked; with a loud shout he struggled with all his might; but just as his feet start to loosen up, his upper body was drenched in cold water, which also turned into ice.

The soldiers pouring the water had been trained well; four soldiers lifted the pot to pour water, while the other four-man teams were ready behind them. One team after another they pour water into the hole like a waterwheel. To protect themselves from the boiling water, each man bound a cloth on their faces. Who would have thought that the snow would not boil, but the cold water could also paralyze the enemy. In a short period of time twenty pots of water had been poured into the hole, forming a four, five 'zhang's and about seven feet in diameter ice column.

Everybody was excited, what they thought was a failure turned into a huge success. The three elders supervised the soldiers to dig around the hole; then tied a rope around the ice column. With the help of twenty horses the ice column was pulled up to the ground.

From all over the camp officers and soldiers alike came to the command-center tent to watch the marvelous sight. The soldiers joined their strength to raise the ice column up. Under the bright torch light they saw Ouyang Feng showing his teeth with an angry look on his face, his hands and feet splayed wide. He was frozen inside the ice column, could not move even one bit. The officers and soldiers erupted in thunderous applause.

Lu Youjiao was afraid with his profound internal energy Ouyang Feng would be able to melt the ice; he ordered the soldiers to melt some more ice and pour the water on the ice column to make it thicker.

"I had made an agreement with him, to spare his life three times. Break the ice, let him go!" Guo Jing ordered.

The three elders were disappointed, but a hero ought to keep his words, so they did not say anything. Lu Youjiao took a hammer and walked toward the ice column to break it when suddenly Jian Zhanlao called out, "Hold on!" He turned to Guo Jing and asked, "Sir, with his ability, how long do you think Ouyang Feng will survive inside the ice?"

"He might be able to survive for a couple of hours," Guo Jing said, "Longer than that his life might be in danger."

"Very well," Elder Jian said, "Let him suffer two more hours. We can spare his life, but he has to suffer for a while."

Remembering Ouyang Feng had killed his masters, Guo Jing nodded his head in approval.

The news traveled fast, officers and soldiers from other units heard about it and they came to watch. To the three elders Guo Jing said, "From the ancient times there was a saying, 'a hero could be killed, but not humiliated.' Although he is an evil man, but he is still a grandmaster of his martial art school. How can we let him be the laughingstock of others?" Straightaway he ordered his soldiers to erect a tent around the ice column and arranged a sentry duty. Nobody was allowed to enter the tent to see, not even a general.

Two hours later the three elders shattered the ice column, let Ouyang Feng free. Ouyang Feng sat cross-legged on the

ground, circulating his energy. After vomiting three mouthfuls of dark blood he went away angrily.

Guo Jing and the three elders were watching him the whole two hours; although looked weary he was able to walk away just like that, he had made them sighed in admiration.

All this time Guo Jing was continuously in a daze. He was afraid when Ouyang Feng was still inside the ice column, but after Ouyang Feng was gone, he still could not calm his heart down.

He sat down, thinking hard. Never in his life had he felt so lonely, his heart was empty. He tried hard to think the reason behind it all. Suddenly it dawned on him that before Lu Youjiao issued the command to pour the water, he recalled hearing someone shouted in low voice, 'Pour the water!' He felt that voice was so familiar, he was 80, 90% certain that voice had Huang Rong's accent; but because Ouyang Feng was falling into the trap that he was thinking of a more urgent matter and did not pay too much attention to the voice. 'Pour the water!' these words were buzzing in his ears while his heart was full of doubt. He sprang up and muttered, "Rong'er is really in the army. I have to examine everybody, officers and soldiers alike, not overlooking anyone. I am sure she won't get away this time." But then another thought came into his mind, "She doesn't want to see me, why would I painstakingly force her to come out?" Unrolling the painting, he stared blankly at the girl in it; his heart was filled with bitter sweet feeling.

In the quiet night suddenly he heard hoof beats coming fast from afar. A short while later he heard his guard asked permission and soon a messenger entered his tent, bringing Genghis Khan's military dispatch. Turned out the Mongolian army had advanced far into the enemy's territory, enjoying victory everywhere they went. Just a few

hundred 'li's to the west they would reach Khoresm's fortified city of Samarkhand. Genghis Khan had learned that this city had become Khoresm's new capital. It was defended by a large army of at least a hundred thousand strong with enough provision to last a long time. The defense was solid; the city wall had enjoyed a notorious reputation as unbreakable. Therefore, Genghis Khan ordered the four armies to join forces and attack simultaneously.

At daybreak the next day, Guo Jing's army left their camp heading south along the river. In ten days they arrived outside Samarkhand's city wall. Seeing Guo Jing's small army, the enemy went out the city to engage them in fierce battle. With his 'feng yang' [scattering wind] and 'yun chui' [dangled cloud] Guo Jing managed to kill about five thousand enemy's soldier in just half a day. With this defeat the Khoresm army was forced to go back inside their fortified city.

On the third day Genghis Khan's big army, as well as Jochi's and Chagatai's, arrived one after another. More than a hundred thousand soldiers surrounded the city, attacking it from all directions. But Samarkhand's defense was so tight; thousands of Mongolian soldiers and officers were wounded or dead, yet the city was still standing strong.

The next day Chagatai's eldest son attempted to render meritorious merit; bravely he attacked the city wall, unfortunately an arrow was shot from the city wall, hit his head and he died. Genghis Khan loved this grandson, seeing him die in the battlefield his grief and anger was unspeakable. When the grandson's personal guards brought his body over, Genghis Khan threw himself over the corpse with tears in his eyes, embracing his dead grandson. He pulled the arrow that killed him, only to see it was a wolf tooth arrow decorated with an eagle's feather, the shaft

was inlaid with gold, engraved with four characters, 'da jin zhao wang' [Prince Zhao Wang of the Great Jin]. The people around him who were literate read those words to him.

"Ah!" Genghis Khan angrily roared, "It's that scoundrel Wanyan Honglie!" Leaping to his horseback he issued a decree, "All officers and soldiers, big and small, hear this: Anybody who is brave enough to break the city's defense and capture Wanyan Honglie to avenge my grandson; the city's women and children, jade and silk, everything is his." A hundred riders immediately were dispatched everywhere to announce the Great Khan's decree.

The other three armies heard this proclamation and their spirit rose; like a swarm of locust they attacked the city wall with earth-shattering battle cry. Some were trying to climb the wall barehanded; some were scaling ladders, some were throwing ropes with hook, some were using large tree trunk as a battering ram against the city gate. But the warriors on the city wall defended their city bravely. The battle continued until evening; the Mongolians had lost about four thousand men, yet the city of Samarkand was still standing like a mountain.

Since his military expedition against Khorasm started, this was Genghis Khan's first major defeat. That night inside his tent he grieved over his beloved grandson's death, his anger erupted like a thunder.

Guo Jing went back to his tent, browsing through his 'Wumu's Legacy', trying to find a way to break the city; but Samarkand was different from the cities in China, hence the methods described in the book were useless.

Guo Jing invited Lu Youjiao to his tent to discuss this situation. Knowing Lu Youjiao would go to Huang Rong for advice, as soon as he left the tent, Guo Jing followed behind.

Who would have thought that Lu Youjiao had arranged Beggar Clan disciples to stand all the way from Guo Jing's tent to his own? As they see Guo Jing, those disciples saluted him with loud voice.

Guo Jing understood immediately, "This must be another one of Rong'er's schemes," he thought, "Ay! She has always found a way to evade me. She is able to predict my every action and every movement accurately."

More than two hours later, Lu Youjiao came back and reported, "This big city is really difficult to break, Xiao Ren has not found any good idea. Let us wait a few more days, perhaps an opportunity will present itself for us to attack."

Guo Jing nodded without saying anything. When he left Mongolia heading south for the first time, he was just a naïve and simple-hearted youngster; but over the past year he had experienced misery, difficult and sometimes dangerous days. His experience had matured him tremendously. That night inside his tent he could not help but feel emotional as he quietly pondered the meaning of two lines of poems in the painting. He thought, "Rong'er must think I am heartless, she is waiting for me to apologize. Too bad I am stupid since the day I was born, I don't know how to make amends, I don't know how to do as she wishes." Thinking these things he became more anxious than ever.

That night he could not sleep well, his thought was full of Huang Rong; he kept tossing and turning in his tent. It was after the third hour that he finally was able to sleep. He dreamt of meeting Huang Rong. He asked her how he could apologize to her. Huang Rong replied by whispering something in his ears. Guo Jing was elated, he woke up immediately; but then he could not remember what Huang Rong had said. He tried painstakingly to remember, but no

such luck. He wanted to go back to sleep again and asked Huang Rong in his dream, but it seemed like the sleep had already left him.

Burning with anxiety he knocked his own head several times; suddenly he got an inspiration, "I can't remember, but why don't I ask her again?" He loudly shouted, "Quickly invite Lu Zhanglao to come over."

Lu Youjiao thought what kind of urgent military affair would need his attention? Wrapping his body with the sheepskin he went barefooted to Guo Jing's tent.

"Lu Zhanglao, no matter what I want to meet with Miss Huang tomorrow evening," Guo Jing said, "I don't care how you'd do it. Whether you come up with an idea yourself, or you ask others, but I want you to present me with a clever idea how I can see her. I give you until noon tomorrow."

Lu Youjiao was flabbergasted. "Huang Bangzhu is not here, how can Sir meet with her?"

"You have a divine wisdom, you should be able to think of something," Guo Jing replied, "If you can't present a good idea by noon tomorrow, I am going to handle you according to the military law." Being aware that he was speaking nonsense, Guo Jing was secretly amused.

Lu Youjiao was about to reason when Guo Jing turned his head to tell his guard, "Prepare a hundred soldiers to act as executioners tomorrow at noon." His guard acknowledged with a loud voice.

Lu Youjiao looked distressed; dejectedly he walked back to his tent.

It was snowing heavily early morning the next day; the city wall was covered with ice, slick like oil. It was impossible to

scale the wall. Genghis Khan withdrew his army that day. He thought the winter was coming, the coming days would get colder and colder; they wouldn't see warmer days until the second or third month, which was still several months away. If he decided to leave this city and proceeded to the west, then he would practically leave around a hundred thousand enemies behind him, with a potential to cut his way back to Mongolia. But if he stationed some of his army to guard the city, he was afraid the enemy would get some enforcement then his troops would be overwhelmed by sheer numbers. Once a battle broke, his troops might be scattered in this foreign land and he would lost considerable men and horses.

Genghis Khan paced back and forth in front of his tent with his hands behind his back. He was lost in thought and stared blankly at the snow-covered peak on which the city was built. That peak was so high that it reached to the clouds above. Genghis Khan creased his brows. He saw the peak was extremely weird; it towered alone in the middle of a desert. There was no vegetation grew on it, the locals called it 'tu mu feng' [the bald wooden peak]. Samarkhand was built leaning on this peak, the foothill was actually served as the west city wall. He imagined whoever built this city must have spared no expense; the military strategists and the builders who designed this city must have had incredible ability and wisdom. This hill was very steep, practically a huge solid rock, nothing could grow on it; even monkeys or apes had no way of climbing it up. Samarkhand had this kind of truly impenetrable defense.

Genghis Khan thought, "Ever since the start of my military career, I have been in hundreds of battles, big and small; yet I have never faced as difficult situation as I have today. I wonder if the Heaven is going to cut me short?" He sat on the horseback, staring blankly at the falling snowflakes. The



tents were covered with snow; while inside the city smokes went up the chimneys. Everything just added to his misery.

Guo Jing's mind was filled with another kind of apprehension; he was wondering if his brute force method of forcing Huang Rong to show herself would actually make her hate him even more. What if Lu Youjiao had determined not to open his mouth? Certainly he could not behead him, could he?

It was almost noon, with composed face Guo Jing sat in his tent; while on the either sides of the tent stood the executioners, waiting. Then the bugle sounded, announcing it was noon.

Lu Youjiao walked into the tent, "Xiao Ren has thought of an idea, but I am afraid Sir would find it difficult to do," he said.

Guo Jing was delighted, "Tell me, quick! I don't care even if it requires my life. What's so difficult?" he asked.

Lu Youjiao pointed to the peak of the 'bald wooden peak' and said, "Tonight about half an hour to midnight, Huang Bangzhu will be waiting there."

Guo Jing was silent. "How can she climb there?" he asked, "Aren't you just making a fool out of me?"

"Didn't I say from the start it's not going to be easy?" Lu Youjiao said, "Even if I invented an ingenious plan, it would be in vain anyway." Finished speaking he made a bow, turned around and walked out the tent.

Guo Jing thought, "Sure enough it was Huang Rong's words; she is calling me useless. This bald peak is a lot steeper than the Iron Palm Peak, the Mongolian cliff was

nothing compared to it. I wonder if there is a deity on the peak who will hang down a rope for me to climb?"

Dejectedly he dismissed the executioners then walked toward the peak, staring blankly at the top. He noticed that from top to bottom the peak did not show any difference, its surface was covered with a thick layer of ice, looked like a slippery crystal, much like the ice column enclosing Ouyang Feng the other day. It was an out-of-this-world mountain, other than birds, no man or beast would be able to reach the top.

Guo Jing looked up to the peak; suddenly 'splat!' his fur cap fell on the snow. In an instant a thought came flashing in his mind, "If I can't see Rong'er, it would be better to die anyway. Although this peak is dangerous, I should risk my life climbing it. Even if I fall down and die, I would still die for her." Once he reached a decision he felt better immediately.

That evening he ate until he was full; then he inserted a dagger on his waist and slung a coil of rope on his back. It was not dark yet when he walked out his tent. To his surprise he saw the three elders Lu, Jian, and Liang were waiting outside, they said, "Xiao Ren will see Sir off to the peak."

"See me off to the peak?" Guo Jing was confused.

"Certainly," Lu Youjiao said, "Doesn't Sir have an appointment to meet Huang Bangzhu on the peak tonight?"

Guo Jing was pleasantly surprised, "So Rong'er is not deceiving me after all," he thought. With a delighted heart he walked along the three elders to the 'bald wooden peak'.

He saw dozens of his soldiers were waiting by the peak with dozens of cattle and sheep. Lu Youjiao said, "Butcher!"

The soldier lifted up his saber and slashed the sheep's hind leg. While the blood was still warm, the leg was planted on the peak's wall. The blood froze in short time, the leg was firmly planted on the stone wall, then it was further reinforced with iron nails.

Guo Jing had not understood yet what they were doing. Another soldier chopped the other sheep's hind leg and stuck it to the wall, approximately four feet above the first one. Guo Jing was delighted, he understood now that the three elders were making sheep legs ladder. It was cruelty against the animals, but there was simply no better way of doing this.

He saw Lu Youjiao leaped vertically up and perched on the second leg; Jian Zhanlao chopped the next sheep leg and tossed it upward, Lu Youjiao stuck the leg to the wall. Several legs later, this 'sheep ladder' had reached dozens of 'zhang's high; when the legs were chopped on the ground and tossed up, they would freeze up by the time they reached their destination. Guo Jing helped the three elders hung the rope down. They hoisted the sheep up alive and butcher them just before sticking up their legs on the wall.

As the 'sheep ladder' had reached about a half way up, they felt the wind was a lot stronger compared to the ground. Fortunately these four were martial art experts; their bodies slightly swayed, but their feet were steadily planted on the legs. Still, for fear that they might skid on the legs and lose their footing they tied a long rope on their waists, so the four of them would be able to help each other in case of an accident.

They were busy working until almost midnight when finally the 'sheep ladder' reached the peak. The three elders no doubt were exhausted, while Guo Jing himself was sweating

profusely. Lu Youjiao was panting and smiling at the same time, "Sir, can you forgive Xiao Ren?" he asked.

Guo Jing felt bad, but also grateful, "I really don't know how to repay three gentlemen's kindness," he said.

"It was Bangzhu's idea, even if it is more difficult than it was, we still would have to obey. Who told us to have such a cunning and weird Bangzhu?" Lu Youjiao said. Three elders burst in laughter, turned around and slowly descended the peak.

Only after watching the three elders step by step scaling the hillside safely that Guo Jing turned around and saw the magnificent scenery on the hilltop. Ten thousands years of cold had created a world of crystal of many colors; some resembled reddish-green flowers and grass; some resembled strange beast or exotic birds; some resembled a forest of rocks; some resembled tree branches or bamboo grooves. Guo Jing enjoyed the scenery with amazement; his heart was full of praises.

Thinking that very soon Huang Rong would climb the 'sheep ladder' to see him, his blood rushed through his body, giving him a warm, fuzzy feeling, making his cheeks red. He was in daze. Suddenly he heard a girl's soft giggle. This giggle was like an electric shock surged through Guo Jing. He turned around quickly, and saw under the moonlight a young girl smiled sweetly looking at him. Who else if not Huang Rong? Although Guo Jing knew perfectly well that she had promised to see him there, but to actually see her in person, he felt like he was dreaming.

Two people stared at each other for a moment then both of them rushed toward each other, ignoring the slippery cold ice of the peak; because of their grief and joy, they ran and slipped together. Guo Jing was afraid Huang Rong might be

injured, before he even touched the ground he kicked back and propelled his body forward, grabbing her, embracing her in his arms. They had been separated for more than a year and they missed each other like crazy. This time they meet again, how could they not be happy?

After quite a while Huang Rong gently pried herself loose. They sat side by side on a round-stone-like ice block. "If I did not see how crazily you missed me, I wouldn't want to see you," she said.

Guo Jing only stared at her, did not say even half a word. After a long time he opened his mouth, "Rong'er."

"Mmm?" Huang Rong answered.

Guo Jing was extremely joyful; he called again, "Rong'er."

Huang Rong smiled, "Haven't you called me enough?" she asked, "These past few days, even though I was not with you, haven't you called me dozens of times every day?"

"How did you know?" Guo Jing asked.

Huang Rong smiled again, "You could not see me, but actually I saw you quite often."

"You are always in our army, how come you did not let me see you?" Guo Jing asked.

"You still have a face to ask me?" Huang Rong was angry. "Once you found out I am alive and well, aren't you going to marry that Princess Huazheng? I'd rather not let you know my whereabouts. Do you think I am dumb?"

As soon as he heard she mentioned the name 'Huazheng' Guo Jing's delight was gone; his face looked so depressed that Huang Rong quickly looked around and said, "That

crystal palace is so beautiful, let us go inside and find someplace to sit and chat."

Guo Jing followed her gaze and saw a bulk solid ice resembling a cavern; under the dim moonlight it glowed beautifully. It did look like a big crystal block carved into a palace. Two people walked hand in hand entering the cave, and then found someplace to sit on.

"Speaking about how you treated me on the Peach Blossom Island, tell me, should I forgive you?" Huang Rong said.

Guo Jing stood up and said, "Rong'er, let me kowtow to you a hundred times to apologize." He was serious, immediately knelt down and started kowtowing.

Huang Rong sweetly smiled, held out her hands to stand him up. "Let it be. If I haven't forgiven you, I wouldn't want to crawl to this peak even if you chop Lu Youjiao's head a hundred times!"

Guo Jing was really happy, "Rong'er, you are really good."

"What are you talking about good or not good?" Huang Rong said, "Originally I thought you wholeheartedly wanted to avenge your masters, certainly you don't have the least of me in your heart; naturally I was really angry! Later on I learned about how you strike an agreement with Ouyang Feng; you are willing to spare his life three times for my sake. Only then did I know that you still have me in your heart."

Guo Jing shook his head, "I can't believe it's only now that you know my heart."

Huang Rong pursed her lips and smiled, "Did you see what I am wearing?" she asked.

Thus far Guo Jing's eyes only looked at Huang Rong's face; only after Huang Rong mentioned it that he turned his gaze to her clothes. Turned out she was wearing the black sable fur coat that he gave her when they first met at Zhangjiakou [Kalgan]. His heart was moved, he held out his hand and tightly hold Huang Rong's hand.

Two people sat leaning to each other for a moment. Finally Guo Jing broke the silence, "Rong'er, Da Shifu [First Master] said that you were captured by Ouyang Feng at the Temple of the Iron Spear; how did you manage to escape from his hand?"

Huang Rong sighed. "I feel sorry for Lu Shige's [Martial (older) Brother] nice Cloud Village. The Old Poison wanted me to explain the Nine Yin Manual for him. I said the explanation is not difficult, but I needed a good and quiet place. The Old Poison said if that was the case, we would find some secluded temple. I said Buddhist monks are disgusting, I don't like eating vegetarian food. The Old Poison then asked what I wanted. I said nearby Lake Tai there was a place called the Cloud Village; the scenery is beautiful, the food and wine are superb. The only thing is that the village master is my friend; it made him rather suspicious."

"That's right," Guo Jing said, "Did he decide not to go?"

"No, he is arrogant," Huang Rong said, "He is never afraid of other people. The more I told him, the more he wanted to go. He said no matter how many friends I have, the Old Poison would face them all. When we arrived at the Cloud Village, actually Lu Shige father and son were not home; they went north of the river to the city of Baoying, to visit their in-laws, Cheng Da Xiaojie's [Eldest Miss Cheng] family. You know that the Zhuangzhu [Village Master] had learned building technique from my father according to the 'wu

xing ba gua' [five ways eight diagram]. As soon as the Old Poison stepped into the village, he felt something was not right. He wanted to pull me out of there, but I entered to the east and turned to the west, very soon he lost my track. Hard as he tried, he could not find me, and in his anger he burned the Cloud Village down."

"Ah!" Guo Jing gasped, "I did stop by the Cloud Village looking for you, but I found it in rubble. Turned out it was the Old Poison's doing."

"I knew he was going to destroy the village," Huang Rong said, "So I warned everybody to get out. Although he could not catch me, the Old Poison is really evil and cruel. He guarded the way toward the Peach Blossom Island, hoping to catch me there. Several times I was nearly caught. Afterwards I ran to the north, toward the Mongolian border, and he followed. 'Sha gege' [dumb big brother], luckily you are dumb. If you are as smart as the Old Poison, you two will surround me from both directions. I may not know where to hide."

Guo Jing simply blushed and smiled stupidly.

"But finally you are getting smarter, you knew how to push Lu Youjiao to think of something," Huang Rong said.

"Rong'er, it was you who taught me," Guo Jing said.

Huang Rong was astonished, "I taught you?"

"You taught me in a dream," Guo Jing replied. Then he told her the dream he had the other night.

This time Huang Rong did not laugh at him, in fact, her heart was moved. She said quietly, "The people of ancient times used to say that perfect honesty and sincerity could



open up metal and stone. You think about me and miss me this much; I should've let you see me sooner."

"Rong'er," Guo Jing said, "Later on you will never leave me forever, won't that be good?"

Huang Rong swept her gaze around the marvelous structures cluttered on the peak. "Jing Gege, I am cold," she suddenly said.

Guo Jing hastily took his own fur coat off and wrapped it on Huang Rong's body. "Let us go down," he said.

"All right," Huang Rong said, "We'll come back here tomorrow night. I am going to explain the Nine Yin Manual in detail for you."

Guo Jing was astounded, "What?" he asked.

Huang Rong's right hand was still holding Guo Jing's left hand; she squeezed her hand and said, "My father has translated the last part of the manual, where the sentences were jumbled. I'll explain everything to you tomorrow night."

"This Sanskrit part is obviously translated by Reverend Yideng," Guo Jing thought, "Why did she say it was his father?" He was full of doubts, was about to ask again when Huang Rong squeezed his hand one more time. He knew there must be a reason, so he agreed without asking anymore questions. Two people went down the peak.

Once they were in his tent, Huang Rong whispered in his ear, "Ouyang Feng also climbed the 'bald wooden peak', he hid behind us as we speak, secretly listening to us."

Guo Jing was startled, "Ah! I didn't even know he was there."

“He was hiding behind a huge ice block,” Huang Rong said, “The Old Poison is extremely crafty, but this time he forgot that the ice is transparent, it could not conceal anything. It was not until the moonlight shone on it did I see a blurry shadow behind it.”

“So you talked about the Nine Yin Manual was actually for his benefit,” Guo Jing said.

“Hmm, I want to lure him to the peak, then we remove the ‘sheep ladder’; let’s see if he can meditate to become an immortal on that mountain peak, maybe he’ll become a deity,” Huang Rong said.

Guo Jing was very happy; he clapped his hands and cheered.

The next day Genghis Khan attacked the city again. Another thousand or so Mongolian soldiers died. The Khoresm soldiers on the city wall threw some insults and cursed their enemy. Genghis Khan flew into rage; but sweeping the battlefield with his eyes he saw the dead body of Mongolian soldiers and horses; he was upset.

That very evening Guo Jing, Huang Rong and the three Beggar Clan Elders readied themselves, they only had to wait for Ouyang Feng to climb the peak, then they would destroy the sheep ladder immediately. Who would have thought that Ouyang Feng was so cunning and had anticipated this; as long as Guo Jing and Huang Rong did not climb up, he also stayed down, hiding.

Huang Rong was forced to think of something else. She took some ropes and soaked them in oil. Khoresm was rich in petroleum; more than a thousand years ago the people dug a well to find water, but they found oil instead. Since then the people had used oil to cook their meals. The

Mongolian army had seized several barrels of this oil and used them as fuel.

Jing and Rong, two people climbed to the peak with ropes soaked in oil on their back. Then they hid the ropes behind a big ice block. Two people sat inside the crystal palace talking to each other. Not too long afterwards they saw Ouyang Feng's indistinct shadow appeared behind a big ice block. His lightness kungfu had been trained to perfection; he was extremely quiet, he never expected those two people to be aware that he was there.

Right away Huang Rong started talking about the manual, which they discussed earnestly. Of course they were discussing the real Manual. Ouyang Feng listened attentively, he found the manual was really marvelous; could not help but feeling ecstatic. He thought even if he compelled this little girl to explain, she might not tell him the whole thing, but right now he was eavesdropping he felt very fortunate.

Huang Rong slowly explained, and Guo Jing pretended to ask a lot of questions. Ouyang Feng thought, "He did not get such a simple truth, he is really stupid."

Suddenly the horn was sounded urgently on the ground. Guo Jing jumped up immediately, "The Great Khan summons the generals, I have to go," he called out. Actually it was a false alarm; he had made this arrangement in advance.

"We'll go down together," Huang Rong said.

"We are going up and down this peak, so much hassle," Guo Jing said, "Can't we do it inside my tent?"

"No, that Old Ouyang Feng has been looking for me everywhere, he is so cunning; it is extremely difficult to find

a place to hide from him,” Huang Rong said, “But even if he were ten times more cunning, definitely he won’t guess that we are able to come up to this peak.”

Ouyang Feng was really smug, he thought, “Hey, this tiny, tiny peak is nothing; even if you run to the end of the earth I will still chase you.”

“Then you’d better wait here,” Guo Jing said, “I should be finished within an hour or so; I’ll hurry back up here.”

Huang Rong nodded her approval.

Without saying anything else Guo Jing climbed down the peak. He was a little bit apprehensive about leaving Huang Rong alone on the top with Ouyang Feng, but he thought Ouyang Feng must be dying to listen to the Manual’s secret; certainly he would not harm Huang Rong yet.

About the time needed to eat a bowl of rice later Huang Rong stood up and thought aloud, “Why is Jing Gege not back yet? I wonder if there are ghosts on this peak. Maybe Yang Kang or Ouyang Ke’s ghosts are here. I think I’d better go down, I’ll comeback with Jing Gege later on.”

Ouyang Feng was afraid she might see him, he curled up behind the ice block, did not dare to move even so slightly. He saw Huang Rong was climbing down the peak.

Guo Jing and the three elders were waiting on the ground. As soon as Huang Rong was down, they lighted a fire and burned the rope. Turned out when Guo Jing went down, he wrapped the oil-soaked rope on each of the sheep legs. As the rope was burned, the heat melted the ice that held the legs frozen to the wall, so that the legs dropped one by one to the ground.

The fire slowly crept upward along the winding rope. The dark night made the fire's reflection on the snow and ice looked frighteningly beautiful. Huang Rong clapped her hands in delight and asked, "Jing Gege, would you say we should spare his life this time?"

"This is the third time," Guo Jing said, "We can't break our agreement."

Huang Rong smiled, "I have an idea," she said, "You don't have to break your agreement, but you can kill him to avenge your masters."

Guo Jing was delighted, "Rong'er, you are always full of ideas," he said, "Tell me your marvelous idea."

Huang Rong smiled, "It's not difficult," she said, "We let the Old Poison eat the northwest wind for ten whole days and nights; let him freeze and starve, he will be dead tired. Then we rebuild the 'sheep ladder', help him get back down. That will be the third time we spare his life, won't it?"

"That's correct," Guo Jing said.

"You have spared his life three times by then, you don't have to show leniency anymore," Huang Rong said. "We wait here on the ground. As soon as he is down, we can start fighting him. We will have the three elders' help; so with five people against a half-dead man, you say can we kill him?"

"We certainly can," Guo Jing said, "But this way we are not acting too gentlemanly, don't you think?"

"Hey," Huang Rong scolded, "Do we need to talk gentlemanly toward this kind of evil and cruel man? Did he act gentlemanly when he killed your five masters?"

Thinking about his benevolent masters' cruel death, Guo Jing was enraged. He also thought that Ouyang Feng's skill was so high that if he let him off this time, he might not find another opportunity to seek revenge. Therefore, he gritted his teeth and said, "Very well, let's do it."

Two people went inside the tent. This time they discussed the Nine Yin Manual for real. They found out that the other party's martial art was progressing tremendously, they were really grateful.

After the discussion Guo Jing said, "That traitor Wanyan Honglie is inside the city wall. We know he is there, but there is nothing we can do. Can you think of some marvelous way to break the city's defense?"

Huang Rong was doubtful. "These past several days I have been racking my brain," she said, "I can think of at least a dozen ways to do it, but none of these guarantees victory."

Guo Jing replied, "Within the Beggar Clan there are some brothers, perhaps a dozen of them, whose lightness kungfu is superb. What if they plus we, two people, try to climb the city wall?"

Huang Rong shook her head. "Not that easy," she said, "Every 'zhang' of the wall is heavily guarded by soldiers with bows and arrows. Let's not talk about climbing the wall; once inside, there are more than a hundred-thousand troops. We can't even force our way to open up the gate."

Two people talked all night long; they did not even go to sleep.

The next day Genghis Khan attacked the city again. About ten thousand Mongolian soldiers used rock-throwers, rained the city with large rocks. But the soldiers defending the city took shelter inside blockhouses; the stones

devastated the common people's residences, but the casualty among the defending troops was actually only a few. The attack went on until the third day. The Mongolian army had used hundreds of different tactics, but so far the result was minimal.

On the fourth day snowflakes came floating down from the sky. Guo Jing looked up the peak and said, "I think we don't have to wait for ten days, Ouyang Feng would be frozen to half-dead."

"His internal energy is very profound," Huang Rong said, "Chances are he will survive for ten days." She was just closing her mouth when both of them cried out in alarm; something was falling from the peak, it looked like Ouyang Feng.

Huang Rong clapped her hands, "The Old Poison can't take it anymore, he is killing himself!" she said; but straight away she called out in wonder, "Uh, strange! How did he do that?" Ouyang Feng did not fall straight down, but his body was floating in the sky like a kite.

Jing and Rong, two people were extremely astonished; how could someone fall from thousands of 'zhang' tall mountain peak did not meet a violent death, but floating slowly instead? Could it be the Old Poison possessed some witchcraft?

In the meantime, Ouyang Feng had fallen further down. Now two people could see clearly that he was naked, but there were two balloon-like things on top of his head. Suddenly Huang Rong understood what was going on, "It's too bad!" she called out.

Turned out when Ouyang Feng was stranded on the 'bald wooden peak', although his martial art was profound, he knew he could not slide down this thousand-zhang peak.

After enduring several days of hunger and cold he had a sudden inspiration. He stripped down to his underpants and firmly tied his trousers into knots. Afraid that his trousers might not be enough, he took the robe and tied it to his pants, then tied the whole thing onto his waist. Clenching up his teeth he jumped down from the mountain peak.

It was an extremely risky endeavor, but he was desperate; he had no other alternative. Once he jumped from the peak, his pair of trousers ballooned up and weakened his fall. He was naked, his hands were nearly frozen; he fought the cold and the wind by circulating his deep internal energy.

Huang Rong was amused and upset at the same time; momentarily she was at lost on how to deal with this new development.

By this time both armies inside and outside the city wall had found out about this; tens of thousand pairs of eyes looked up to see this flying man in the sky. Many low-ranking soldiers thought it was a deity descending to the earth; they all knelt down on the ground, worshiping.

Guo Jing saw the direction Ouyang Feng was falling; looked like he was going to land inside the city wall. He waited until Ouyang Feng was dozens of 'zhang's away, then grabbing an iron bow and an arrow he shot Ouyang Feng's body. He thought being airborne, Ouyang Feng would not be able to fend off; however, he still remembered his agreement to spare Ouyang Feng's life three times, so he aimed at a non-fatal spot; Ouyang Feng's thigh.

While he was airborne, however, Ouyang Feng opened his eyes wide, looking to all directions. He saw the arrow coming his way, he bent his waist, swept his legs and struck down Guo Jing's arrows one by one.



Although in a different army unit, Genghis Khan was also aware of Guo Jing's agreement. He ordered his troops to shoot arrows. Immediately tens of thousands arrows shot out like a swarm of locusts flying toward Ouyang Feng.

Even if he had a thousand hands and ten thousands legs, it was no way Ouyang Feng could knock all the arrows down. He was naked, and being airborne his movement was limited; perhaps very soon he would look like a porcupine. In this dire situation Ouyang Feng let his hands go, he fell down head first to the ground. Hundreds of thousands people shouted with one voice, the noise was earth-shattering.

Amazingly Ouyang Feng flexed his waist midair and threw himself toward a flag inside the city. That time the northwesterly wind was blowing very strong, the flag fluttered straight from west to east. Ouyang Feng stretched out his left hand and grabbed the corner of the flag, tearing it into two pieces. Borrowing the strength of the flag, Ouyang Feng made a somersault, hurling his legs toward the flag pole. Hugging the pole he slid downward and vanished inside the city wall.

Both armies witnessed this marvelous show, they talked about it to each other, momentarily forgot they are in the midst of a battle.

"This can't be considered sparing his life," Guo Jing thought, "How can I still have to spare his life next time? Rong'er must be very upset." Who would have thought that as he turned his head he saw Huang Rong's eyes were gleaming with smile on her face. Quickly he asked, "Rong'er, what's wrong? Why are you so happy?"

Huang Rong clapped her hands and laughed, "I present to you a great gift, wonder if you'll like it or not?"

“What gift?” Guo Jing asked.

“The City of Samarkhand,” Huang Rong replied.

Guo Jing was dumbstruck.

“The Old Poison has taught me a method to break the city’s defense,” Huang Rong said, “Go and prepare your troops. Tonight you will render a great service.” Then she whispered in Guo Jing’s ear, explaining what to do next. Once he understood, Guo Jing was so happy that he repeatedly cheered and applauded.

That afternoon Guo Jing issued a secret order, assigned his troops to take their tents down and cut them into round umbrella shapes; then to tie leather ropes to this umbrella. He wanted ten thousands of umbrellas to be sewn and ready within an hour.

All the officers and soldiers were puzzled. They thought without tents in this bitter cold weather, the nights were unendurable. But the commander-in-chief had issued an order; they had no alternative but to comply.

Guo Jing also ordered his army to gather the cattle and sheep under the snowy peak. Furthermore he assigned a ten thousand men unit to be ready outside the north gate in four battle formations: ‘tian fu’ [sky high], ‘di zai’ [strong earth], ‘feng yang’ [scattered wind], and ‘yun chui’ [dangling cloud]; ready to assault the enemy. Then he placed another ten thousand men unit on the either sides of the north gate in four battle formations: ‘long fei’ [flying dragon], ‘hu yi’ [winged tiger], ‘niao xiang’ [soaring bird], and ‘she pan’ [coiled snake]. Their main assignment was to drive the enemy into the first unit’s ambush. The third ten thousand men unit was readied on the side to be deployed later.

That evening Guo Jing's troops ate their provisions until everybody was satisfied, then the two ten-thousand men units moved to their appointed position on the north gate. Around the end of the eleventh hour, early the twelfth hour [approximately 9pm] Guo Jing dispatched one of his guards to report to the Great Khan, asking him to dispatch the army to surround the city, for the gates were about to be broken. Genghis Khan was surprised, he was doubtful. He told the guard to go and summon Guo Jing to his Golden Tent. That guard replied, "The Golden Blade Consort [jin dao fu ma] at this very moment has already led his troops to launch an attack. He is waiting for the Great Khan to render assistance."

Right around that moment a horn sounded from the direction of Guo Jing's troops; about a thousand soldiers started to butcher the cattle and the sheep, building the sheep ladder on the peak wall. The Beggar Clan disciples with their high level of martial arts skill went up and down lending their hands; very soon dozens of 'sheep ladders' were constructed.

Guo Jing shouted his command, and was the first to go up the peak. Ten thousand officers and soldiers followed, with long ropes tied to their waists, slowly climbing up the ladder. They were all under a strict order that was issued earlier not to make any noise at all.

In the dark night dozens of long strings of soldiers crawling and twisting like gigantic dragon slithering up the peak.

The top was actually not very wide, so it was impossible to hold ten thousand men at once. As soon as he had gathered enough people, Guo Jing led the soldiers to tie the umbrella to their waist; then with unsheathed weapons in their hands they were ready to leap into the city. Their target was the south gate.

With a clap of his hands Guo Jing was the first to jump down, followed by several hundreds of the Beggar Clan disciples.

Actually this jumping down from the peak was very dangerous, but the Mongolian soldiers were very brave. Earlier that day they saw Ouyang Feng had jumped from the peak with a pair of trousers as his parachute; they believed their umbrellas were a lot safer than the trousers; moreover, their commander-in-chief had given them the example; therefore, one by one they leaped down courageously. Very soon the sky was full with thousands of blooming parachutes, taking the officers and soldiers slowly down.

Huang Rong was sitting on an ice block on the peak. She saw the first phase of their plan was successfully completed; she could not help but feeling ecstatic. "Whether Genghis Khan can break the city defense or not, it has nothing to do with me. But if Jing Gege listens to what I say, he can seize the opportunity to do great things."

Once his feet landed on the ground Guo Jing tore the parachute from his waist, brandishing his big saber he fiercely swept the defending troops. By that time there were some defending troops on night watch duty. They saw thousands of enemy troops descending from the sky; they were amazed and scared, they lost their will to fight. Moreover, those who landed first were the Beggar Clan disciples, each one skilled in martial art. In a short moment they were approaching the city gate.

After that the Mongolian army successively landed. Although there were some soldiers who lost their lives because their parachutes failed to open, but in ten soldiers, nine actually made it to the ground safe and sound. Some of them were blown away by the strong wind and landed

outside the city gate; some landed separate from their unit, these soldiers were either captured or killed by the enemy. But those who landed successfully were numbered around one or two thousands. Guo Jing ordered half of them to fight the enemy, while the other half moved toward the city gate.

Genghis Khan saw Guo Jing's troops flew into the city, he was amazed and pleasantly surprised. He ordered all three units of his army to attack concurrently. They saw the south gate was widely open; several hundreds Mongolian soldiers with spears in their hands guarded the gate, letting several thousands of their companions enter the city; and then they immediately joined themselves with Guo Jing's troops, decimating the enemies.

The hundred-thousand defending troops were in panic; they did not know where the enemy came from. The Mongolians killed and splashed oil everywhere, setting the city on fire. The inferno reached the sky, Khoresm army was in total chaos.

It was almost dawn, the defending troops were scattered everywhere. The Khoresm king, Muhammad, received a report that there was no enemy at the north gate, so he rushed to the north to escape. Unexpectedly to him, Guo Jing's ten thousand men had already waited at the either sides of the north gate; arrows and spears moved and made a great kill.

Muhammad did not want to prolong the fight. He ordered Wanyan Honglie to command the defending troops, while he took his personal guards trying to save his own life.

Guo Jing's sole purpose was to find Wanyan Honglie; seeing his golden helmet flashing among the chaotic battle, Guo Jing ordered his troops to hunt him down. The Khoresm

army knew they had lost, but their number was greater; they fought desperately, almost to the point of disregarding their own lives. Guo Jing's troops were smaller, their movement was hindered. From the front came a fast horse reporting that the enemy troops soon would make a breakthrough.

Guo Jing remembered the military strategy book had this saying, "Do not eat enemy's bait, do not stop retreating troops. Surrounded troops are not necessarily weak, exhausted enemy should not be pursued too far." He issued an order to change tactic immediately. His signal flag unfolding, the four formations: sky, earth, wind and cloud, dispersed to surround the enemy. By that time the enemy troops remained around the palace was about ten thousand men; although all were warriors, but they realized the imminent defeat and had lost their fighting spirit; they were easily captured by Guo Jing's troops.

Guo Jing examined the prisoners, but did not see Wanyan Honglie among them. Even though he had achieved victory, but his heart was unavoidably discontented.

By daybreak the city defense was completely destroyed. Genghis Khan held a general assembly inside Muhammad's imperial palace. Guo Jing was in the process of going through his troops, taking care of the dead and comforting the wounded, when he heard the Great Khan's golden horn sounded. Immediately he rushed toward the royal palace.

By the palace gate he saw a small squad of soldiers; Huang Rong, Lu Youjiao and the other elders were standing among them. Huang Rong clapped her hands and two soldiers stepped forward carrying a big gunnysack. She smiled and said, "Hey, can you guess what's inside this sack?"

Guo Jing laughed, "This city has all kinds of strange and wonderful things, how can I guess?" he said.

"This one is my gift to you, I am sure you will like it," Huang Rong said.

Suddenly Guo Jing remembered; could it be that she found a good looking woman in the city and gave her to him as a joke? Quickly he shook his head, "I don't want it," he said.

Huang Rong laughed, "Are you sure?" she asked. "You can't change your mind after you see it."

Immediately she shook the sack and indeed somebody rolled out of it. His hair was disheveled, his face was full of blood; he was wearing a Khoresm army uniform. Guo Jing looked at his face intently, and to his awe, found out that he was the Great Jin's Prince Zhao, Wanyan Honglie. Guo Jing was ecstatic, "Amazing! Where did you capture him?" he asked.

Huang Rong said, "I saw the defeated and dispersed soldiers were fleeing toward the north gate. A squad of soldiers bearing the Prince Zhao's banner were heading east with someone wearing a golden helmet leading them. I thought this scoundrel Wanyan Honglie was slyer than that; in no way would he blatantly flaunt the Prince Zhao's banner in time of defeat. I thought if his banner flew to the east, he must be running to the west; so I took Elder Lu and the others to prepare an ambush in the west. We did indeed capture this scoundrel immediately."

Guo Jing bowed deeply to her, he said, "Rong'er, you have avenged my dear father for me. I really don't know how to express my gratitude."

Huang Rong pursed her lips and smiled, "It was just a coincidence. You have rendered this great service, the

Great Khan will generously reward you. Won't that be great?" she said.

"I don't want anything," Guo Jing said.

Huang Rong stepped to the side and whispered, "Come here." Guo Jing followed. "You really don't want anything in the world?" Huang Rong asked.

Guo Jing was taken aback, "All I want is never to be separated from you anymore," he earnestly said.

Huang Rong smiled. "Today you have rendered this great service. Whatever you ask, I believe the Great Khan won't get angry at you."

"Hmm," Guo Jing still did not understand. Huang Rong continued, "Right this moment if you ask him to appoint you as some high ranking official, he won't deny it. If you ask him not to appoint you, it will also be difficult for him to deny. Important thing is, you have to make him promise in advance. Whatever you ask, he has to grant it."

"Right!" Guo Jing said.

Listening to his short reply 'Right!' without saying anything else, Huang Rong shook her head; she was mad. "Looks like becoming the Golden Blade Consort is the best thing that ever happened to you, isn't it?"

Her words made Guo Jing understand, he called out, "Hmm, I understand. You want me to ask the Great Khan to cancel my marriage; but I have to make sure he promises in advance he won't deny whatever I ask."

Huang Rong was hurt, "It all depends on you. You probably do want to be the Consort?"



“Rong’er,” Guo Jing said, “Sister Huazheng treats me with nothing but sincerity, but my love to her is a brotherly love. At first I thought I was holding to my gentleman’s agreement, since I did not object to the marriage arrangement a long time ago. But if the Great Khan is willing to nullify the agreement, that would certainly satisfy all parties involved.”

Huang Rong was overjoyed; she cast a sidelong glance to him with the sweetest smile on her face. Guo Jing wanted to stay and talk with her some more, but the horn was sounded for the second time from the palace. He placed his hand on hers and said, “Rong’er, wait for my good news here.” He dragged Wanyan Honglie inside the palace to see the Great Khan.

Genghis Khan was very delighted to see Guo Jing arrived; he left his throne to greet him, and then took his hand to enter the hall together. He ordered Guo Jing to take a stool covered with embroidery work and tell him to sit next to him. Listening to Guo Jing’s report on the capture of Wanyan Honglie he was even happier. Seeing Wanyan Honglie kneel down in front of him Genghis Khan lifted his right foot to tread on Wanyan Honglie’s head. Smiling broadly he said, “That day you came to Mongolia flaunting your military power and prestige, did you ever think that there will come a day like today?”

Wanyan Honglie knew his death was imminent, he raised his head boldly and said, “That time my Great Jin country was rich and powerful. I regret the fact that we did not extinguish your tiny Mongolia early on, rather than living to this day.”

Genghis Khan laughed a big laugh, ordering his guard to take Wanyan Honglie out and behead him in front of the

palace. Guo Jing remembered his father's death was finally avenged; his heart was filled with happiness and grief.

Genghis Khan said, "I have promised that whoever breaks the city defense and capture Wanyan Honglie I will give this city's women and children, with all its gold and silk. Go ahead and receive your rewards."

Guo Jing shook his head, "My mother and I have enjoyed the Great Khan's benevolence. We have enough food and clothing. I don't have any use of slaves or gold and silk."

"Good," Genghis Khan said, "That was precisely the true quality of a hero. What then you do want? All you have to do is ask, I will not deny anything."

Guo Jing left his seat and bowed in front of the Khan. "I do have a favor to ask; Great Khan, please do not get angry," he said.

Genghis Khan laughed, "Just say it," he said.

Guo Jing was about to talk about the betrothal when suddenly he heard a heart-rending, earth-shaking cry of thousands of people from a distance. The assembled generals leaped up from their seats, unsheathing their weapons. They thought the surrendered Khoresm soldiers and people suddenly staged a rebellion; they were ready to dash out and suppress it. Genghis Khan laughed. "It's all right! It's all right!" he said, "This dog city refuses to subdue under the Heaven's power, had killed many of my officers and soldiers, it even killed my beloved grandson; it has to be cleansed by slaughter. Let us go and take a look." He left his seat immediately followed by the generals.

They left the palace on horseback heading toward the western part of the city. The nearer they got, the more miserable the cry became. Just outside the city gate they

saw hundreds of thousands common people running around wailing loudly, they pushed and rolled and threw themselves down in panic, with Mongolian soldiers on horseback chasing them, killing the people with long sabers.

Earlier the Mongolian soldiers ordered all the inhabitants to go out of the city, nobody was left behind. At the beginning the people thought the Mongolians were going to search for spies among them; who would have thought that after searching for weapons, they also searched for all kinds of valuables; then they took all good looking young women, married or not, tied them together with long ropes. Samarkhand's residents now realized that they were facing a grave danger. Some people showed resistance, but they were killed immediately with long sabers. Finally several thousands of Mongolian soldiers with loud battle cries charged toward these people, and went on a killing spree with their long sabers. Male or female, young or old, they were randomly chopped down. This massacre was truly with unprecedented brutality; from white or gray haired old men and women, to babies on their mothers' arms, nobody could escape by luck.

When Genghis Khan and his entourage arrived to watch; more than ten thousands people had already fallen victim to the soldiers' brutality; flesh and blood splattered to all directions, the Mongolian horses' iron horseshoes tread on corpses everywhere; going back and forth among the people and kill some more.

Genghis Khan laughed big and called out, "Kill well! Kill well! Let them know my fierceness."

After watching for a short moment, Guo Jing could not endure patiently, he dashed to the front of Genghis Khan's horse and called out, "Great Khan, please spare their lives."

Genghis Khan waved his hand, shouted loudly, "Kill them all, don't leave anybody standing."

Guo Jing did not dare to say anything, but then he saw a boy about seven, eight years old, dash out from the crowd and threw himself down at a woman who was just knocked down by a horse, calling out, "Mama!" A Mongolian soldier dashed in and swung his long saber, mother and son were chopped into four parts. The child's hands were still clutching tightly to his mother.

Guo Jing's blood boiled; he forgot everything and called out, "Great Khan, you said that this city's women and children, along with all gold and silk are mine; why did you give your order to massacre them?"

Genghis Khan was startled; he smiled, "You said you didn't want it."

"You said that whatever I ask you, you will not deny it, didn't you?" Guo Jing asked.

Genghis Khan nodded, still smiling.

With a loud voice Guo Jing said, "The Great Khan's words are like a mountain; I am asking you to spare this tens of thousands lives."

Genghis Khan was greatly astounded, not in his wildest dream would he guess Guo Jing would ask him this; but he had already given his promise, how could he refuse? He was enraged, his eyes blazing with fire looking at Guo Jing. His hand squeezed his saber's hilt, he roared, "Kid, you really want this?"

All the princes and generals were scared to see Genghis Khan this angry. Genghis Khan was surrounded by brave warriors, each one had fought countless battles, none were

weak or had a feeble heart, they faced death straight in the face; but facing Genghis Khan's anger they could not help but tremble.

Guo Jing had never seen Genghis Khan look at him this way, he was also extremely scared; his body could not stop shivering, but he said, "I am asking the Great Khan to spare these people's lives."

With a low growling voice Genghis Khan asked, "You won't regret it?"

Guo Jing remembered Huang Rong told him to ask for cancellation of his betrothal; now he let this good opportunity slipped away. He had lost the Great Khan's favor forever, which he didn't mind; but he actually realized his relationship with Huang Rong was just being thrown down the drain. He had seen and heard these hundreds of thousands common people wailing pitifully; how could he see others facing death and do nothing? Therefore, boldly he said, "I won't regret it."

Genghis Khan heard his trembling voice, he knew Guo Jing was scared to death, but still he boldly made a request. He was forced to admire Guo Jing's guts; drawing a long saber he called out, "Withdraw troops!"

His guard blew the horn. Tens of thousands Mongolian cavalry with blood all over their bodies reined their horses and arranged themselves in neat formation.

Since Genghis Khan became the Great Khan, nobody had ever dared to defy his order. This time Guo Jing bravely hampered his order to massacre the city; he was really angry. With a loud shout he threw his long saber to the ground; then sped his horse back to the city.

The other generals cast their angry looks toward Guo Jing; now that the Great Khan was angry who knew who would be unlucky enough to bear the brunt of his anger. They were also discontented, since as Samarkhand's defense was broken, they were hoping to plunder and kill to their hearts' content for several days; but now their hopes were shattered.

Guo Jing knew the resentment of others, but he ignored them all, he rode his little red horse slowly to a secluded place. Since the beginning of the war, thousands upon thousands homes had been burnt to the ground, corpses scattered everywhere, the snow covered plain was dyed red with blood. He thought, "War brings wretched disaster; bad as it is now. In order for me to seek vengeance for my father I have commanded troops to kill these many people. In order to rule the world, the Great Khan has killed even more people. But for the officers, soldiers, and the common people, what did they do to deserve the cruelest death; their bones abandoned in the wilderness?"

The more he thought, the more restless his heart became, "I destroyed a city to avenge my father, actually killed these many people. In the end, is it worth it?" He wandered around the wilderness on horseback, going back and forth while painstakingly thinking deeply. It was dark when finally decided to go back to his camp.

As he arrived at the camp's gate, he saw the Great Khan's two personal guards were waiting outside. They stepped forward and bowed, reporting, "The Great Khan summons Master Consort. Xiao Ren had been waiting for a long time; asking Master Consort to quickly go."

Guo Jing thought, "Today I have defied his command; the Great Khan might want to behead me. It has gone thus far, I just have to wait and see what will happen." Beckoning to

his own guard he whispered to his ear, ordering him to tell Lu Youjiao that he is going to the palace. He was anxious, but he had determined, "No matter how angry he is, I won't take back my request to spare these people's lives. He is the Great Khan, he can't go back on his words."

His heart was full of the idea that the Great Khan would unleash his anger, who would have thought that as he approached the palace gate he actually heard the Great Khan's merry laughter were heard intermittently from inside the palace. Guo Jing could not help but to be a little bit surprised. He sped up his footstep entering the main hall.

He saw next to the Great Khan sat a man, and next to his foot a young maiden sat leaning on his knee. The man had a ruddy face with white hair, he was none other than the Perpetual Spring [Changchun Zi] Qiu Chuji. As for the young woman; who else but Princess Huazheng?

Guo Jing was delighted, hastily he rushed to meet them. Suddenly Genghis Khan snatched a long halberd from his guard's hand, turned around and fiercely attacked Guo Jing's head with the halberd.

Guo Jing was shocked, he leaned sideways to elude. 'Crack!' the halberd's shaft hit his left shoulder and broke into two pieces. Genghis Khan burst into laughter, "Kid, let the bygone be bygone. If I am not looking at Qiu Daozhang [Taoist Priest] and my daughter's face, I should have taken your head away today."

Princess Huazheng sprang up, she called out, "Father, you must be bullying my Brother Guo Jing while I am not here."

Genghis Khan tossed the broken halberd to the floor. He laughed, "Who said that?"

"I've seen it with my own eyes, how could you deny it?" Huazheng said, "For that reason my heart was troubled, I came with Qiu Daozhang to take a look."

Genghis Khan laughed, he pulled his daughter with one hand, and Guo Jing with the other; he said, "Let's not bicker, just sit nicely, listen while Qiu Daozhang recites his poem."

At the battle of Misty Rain Tavern ['yan yu lou' - 'lou' means upper level of buildings with more than one floor] Qiu Chuji saw with his own eyes that Zhou Botong was alive and well; he also realized that Tan Chuduan was killed by Ouyang Feng. Along with Ma Yu and the others they went to apologize to Huang Yaoshi. Later on Quanzhen Six Masters came across Ke Zhen'e who told them everything, which made everybody sigh deeply. Qiu Chuji regretted deeply that he had been careless with his disciple, he taught Yang Kang martial arts, but did not take him out of the palace. The youngster was spoiled in riches and honor, and finally met his tragic end.

One day he received Genghis Khan's and Guo Jing's letter; he thought Mongolia was getting stronger and might swallow up China. It was exceptional that Genghis Khan should invite someone to come over. He thought he might want to seize the opportunity to give the Khan some advice, trying to open up his heart to the truth, so if he might prevent the slaughter of countless people all over the world, that would be his greatest contribution to mankind. Also, he missed seeing Guo Jing; therefore, braving the cold he took more than a dozen of his disciples to the west.

Qiu Chuji saw Guo Jing had been through wind and snow, his skin was darker, but his body actually looked stronger and healthier; Qiu Chuji was delighted. Before Guo Jing arrived he had been discussing what he had seen and heard



with the Great Khan. He said that he experienced the harshness of the weather first hand, so he composed several poems. Stroking his beard he started to recite: "For ten years the people had dreaded the calamity of war, among millions not even one or two could survive. The past year met a good fortune receiving merciful imperial order, this spring braving the cold making the journey. Taming the three-thousand 'li' of northern mountain range, roaming two-hundred eastern hill provinces. Exhausted and anxious, gasping for the last breath of life; consumed by the people's suffering."

An officer with understanding of Chinese literature called Yelu Chucai translated the poem into Mongolian. Genghis Khan listened; he nodded his head but did not say anything.

To Guo Jing Qiu Chuji said, "That year when your seven masters and I were having a martial art contest at the Drunken Immortal Tavern, your Second Master took a half-finished poem from my pocket. This time I am traveling to the west without being able to see your seven masters again; but finally I have finished this poem." He started reciting immediately, " 'Since the ancient time, the moon of 'zhong-qiu' [mid-autumn festival] has always been the brightest; the cool breeze of the night is so clear. The day the shooting star is brighter than the Milky Way, the dragons of the four seas leaped from the water.' These first four lines were the ones your Second Master had read; I have just finished the next four, he had not seen them yet. 'The song from the Wu and Yue kingdoms tower was heard extensively, the military barrack of Qin kingdom was full with songs, food and wine. I arrived before the emperor upstream of the river, desiring to stop the spears, wishing for peace and security.'"

Remembering The Seven Freaks of Jiangnan, Guo Jing's eyes were brimming in tears.

Genghis Khan said, "During the journey to the west, the Priest must have seen my Mongolia's military prowess. I wonder if you have composed a poem about it?"

Qiu Chuji answered, "Along the way I have seen the Great Khan's power in destroying the cities and ransacking the earth. It made a deep impression in my heart, gave me inspiration to write two stanzas. The first one is, 'The Heaven has sent a messenger down to the earth, why not try to save millions of suffering souls? These millions of souls day and night put to death by dismemberment, drinking the wrath, swallowing their weeping without uttering a word. They looked up and cried to the Heaven, but the Heaven did not answer; it was a mere trivial thing unworthy of Heaven's attention. Peace among thousands of chaos, without religion building refined souls.'"

Yelu Chuchai thought Genghis Khan would not be happy listening to this, so he hesitated and did not translate immediately. Qiu Chuji ignored him, he continued, "My second poem is this, 'Alas, the world is opened wide, on it live millions of living beings. Cruelty and wickedness battle each other incessantly, carrying the human suffering to its utmost. The Emperor of Heaven, the Queen of the earth, along with all deities, witnessing death; why not help? The messenger is sad but helpless, day and night full of heartache in vain'" [Translator's note: all these poems consist of seven-character sub-sentences]

These two poems although not really deep, but the essence of lamenting the fate of mankind was so obvious. Earlier that day Guo Jing had witnessed first hand the massacre of the people in that city, he was even more somber.

"The Priest's poems must be good, what did they say? Quick, translate them for me," Genghis Khan said.

Yelu Chuchai thought, "I have advised the Great Khan not to kill too many innocent civilians, but he didn't want to listen. Luckily this Priest has a deep merciful feeling and composed these beautiful poems. I hope he can persuade the Great Khan." He translated the poem immediately.

Listening to the poems, Genghis Khan was dissatisfied, he turned to Qiu Chuji and said, "I heard there is a technique to reach immortality, to never get old, in China. I hope the Priest would teach me that."

"There is no such thing as reaching immortality, to never get old," Qiu Chuji replied, "But there is indeed a Taoist method of circulating the breathing that will result in preventing illness and prolong life."

"May I ask what the most important thing in that breathing exercise is?" Genghis Khan asked.

"The way of Heaven knows no favorite, always recognizes good man," Qiu Chuji answered.

"Which one would you call good?" Genghis Khan asked.

"A saint's heart is undivided, his heart is for the common people," Qiu Chuji said.

Genghis Khan was silent. Qiu Chuji continued, "There is a scripture in China, it is called the 'Dao De Jing' [Holy Scripture of Virtue] which we, Taoists view as our treasure. The 'the way of Heaven knows' and 'a saint's heart' were taken from that book. There is another saying in that book, 'Soldiers and weapons are inauspicious devices, not the tool of person with noble character. The tool will be used against his own will, not to gain fame or fortune from it. But woe is the man who loves to murder. Those who love to kill will not be able to realize his wish under the sky.'

When Qiu Chuji was traveling to the west, he saw the savageness of the war disaster; his heart was filled with sorrow. He took advantage of Genghis Khan asking him the secret of long life to repeatedly pleading for common people's lives.

Genghis Khan was getting old, his strength waned, he wanted to learn the technique of immortality; he was very delighted to see Qiu Chuji arrive, thinking that very soon he would learn the technique to defy death and the method to prolong his life. Who would have thought that instead he was advised not to resort of military power and not to kill too much? This conversation did not suit his taste. Therefore, after talking a little bit more he turned to Guo Jing and said, "Go and accompany the Priest to take a rest."

[Author's note:

1. Khoresm is a great Islamic country, located on the southern part of Soviet Union, near Afghanistan and Iran. Samarkhand is located in modern day Soviet Union's Uzbekistan Republic. According to the 'yuan shi' [the history of Yuan dynasty], Genghis Khan attacked Khoresm during the year of 'yu long jie chi' [jade dragon, scarlet hero], using petroleum to burn the city down and break their defense.
2. According to historical records, Qiu Chuji and Genghis Khan exchanged correspondence three times before finally he took eighteen of his disciples traveling through the snowy Kunlun Mountains. His disciple, Li Zhicang compiled a book called 'chang chun zhen ren xi you ji' [Changchun (perpetual spring) Sage's journey to the west], recording their experience en route.

This book is still highly esteemed by the scholars of today.]

**End of Chapter 37.**

# Chapter 38 - Secret Order in Embroidered Pouch

Translated by Frans Soetomo



*Guo Jing grabbed one end of his long robe and let his horse run close to Ouyang Feng. Ouyang Feng*

*held out his hand and grabbed the other end. Guo Jing squeezed his legs and gave a loud shout. The little red horse furiously charged forward and with a loud splashing sound Ouyang Feng was pulled out of the mire and dragged along on the snowy ground.*

Guo Jing accompanied Qiu Chuji and his eighteen disciples, among them were Li Zhichang, Yin Zhiping, Xia Zhicheng, Yu Zhike, Zhang Zhizsu, Wang Zhiming, and Song Defang. When they went out of the palace, they saw Huang Rong and the three elders, Lu, Jian, and Liang, as well as about a thousand Beggar Clan disciples all on horseback, waiting outside the palace.

As soon as she saw Guo Jing leave the palace, Huang Rong slapped her horse to move forward, smiling she asked "Is everything all right?"

Guo Jing smiled, "My luck is not bad; Qiu Daozhang [Taoist Priest] arrived just in time, changing the Great Khan's mood to the better," he said.

Huang Rong paid her respects to Qiu Chuji, then she asked Guo Jing again, "I was afraid the Great Khan would kill you in his wrath, I took everybody here ready to rescue you. What did the Great Khan say? Did he agree to cancel your betrothal?"

Guo Jing hesitated for half a day before replying, "I did not ask."

"Why?" Huang Rong was startled.

"Rong'er, please don't get angry," Guo Jing said, "It was because ..." Right then Princess Huazheng rushed out of

the palace, loudly called out, "Guo Jing Gege [big brother – a term of endearment]."

As soon as she saw her, Huang Rong's face changed immediately. She quickly mounted her horse and galloped away. Guo Jing was about to open his mouth to explain, when Huazheng pulled his hand and said, "Weren't you surprised I came here? Are you happy to see me?"

Guo Jing nodded, he turned his head to see Huang Rong, but she had already disappeared. Huazheng only had her eyes to Guo Jing, she did not notice Huang Rong at all; she held his hand, laughing, giggling and telling him how much she missed him.

Guo Jing secretly groaned, "Rong'er must think it was because I saw Huazheng that I did not ask the Great Khan to cancel my betrothal." He was silent and did not hear what Huazheng was saying.

A moment later Huazheng realized Guo Jing was in a daze, she was offended, "What's the matter with you? I came from far away just to see you and you do not pay any attention to me?"

"Meizi [younger sister – term of endearment]," Guo Jing said, "I have a very important matter I need to take care of, we will talk when I come back." Without waiting for her answer he assigned his personal guard to take care of Qiu Chuji, then hurriedly he went back to his camp, looking for Huang Rong.

His guard said, "Miss Huang came back to take the painting, then left toward the eastern gate."

Guo Jing was startled, "What painting?" he asked.



"The painting Master Consort frequently looked at," his guard replied.

Now Guo Jing really freaked out. "She took away this picture that means she really severed her relationship with me. No matter what, I have to go south to look for her." Hurriedly he wrote a letter to Qiu Chuji, then mounting his little red horse he went out of town to pursue.

That little red horse was very fast; but Guo Jing was afraid he might not see Huang Rong anymore, so he kept urging the horse to run even faster. In a short moment they had covered more than ten 'li's, already at the outskirts of the city; soldiers and horses' remains scattered everywhere. Another dozen or so 'li's later, all he saw was a vast open prairie covered with white snow. To his delight, there were horse's tracks on the snow heading east.

"The little red horse is so swift that no other horse in this world is its match. A little more time and I should be able to catch Rong'er," he thought, "I will take mother, then the three of us will go south at once. I don't care if Huazheng Meizi would blame me."

Another dozen of 'li's the track suddenly turned north, and there were human footprints beside the horse's track. The footprints were really peculiar, since the distance between two feet was about four feet; also, the size of the feet were big, but sank into the snow only lightly, only a few inches deep. Guo Jing was startled, "This person's lightness kungfu is excellent." Immediately he recalled something, "There is no one other than Ouyang Feng who has this kind of ability. Could it be that he is pursuing Rong'er?" Thinking of this, even though the cold wind was blowing, he could not help but sweat all over. The little red horse was truly smart, somehow it knew its master was in distress; so without Guo Jing pulling the rein it immediately ran following the tracks.

Guo Jing saw the footprints were always right by the horse's track. Several 'li's later both the track and the footprint suddenly turned west, and then turned south; turning and winding around, there was not a single section that was straight. Guo Jing thought, "Rong'er must have found out Ouyang Feng was chasing her, so she tried to shake him off. But the track is imprinted clearly on the snow, Old Poison won't have any difficulty following her."

Another dozen of 'li's or so, the footprint and the horse track intermingled, they were overlapping another set of footprint and horse track altogether. Guo Jing dismounted the horse to look closer. He was able to tell which set was made earlier and which set was made later. Looking both sets of tracks stretched out far on the snow he suddenly realized something, "Rong'er must have used her father's 'qi men zhi shu' [strange/wonderful/mysterious gate technique]; deliberately winding around to the east and circling to the west to confuse Ouyang Feng. Once he lost her track, she came back to her original route."

He stood back up, his heart was happy and anxious at the same time; happy because he knew most probably Ouyang Feng would not be able to overtake Huang Rong, anxious because of the confusing horse's track he also lost his trail. Standing on the snow he thought, "Rong'er went in circle, but eventually she must be heading east. I have to pursue to the east then." Leaping to his horseback, he looked to the sky to find his bearing then he rode to the east.

After speeding for quite some times, the horse's track indeed reappeared. He saw in the distance, where the blue sky met the snowy plain, a shadow of a person. Guo Jing urged his horse to run even faster and saw that the person was indeed Ouyang Feng. By now Ouyang Feng had also recognized Guo Jing, he called out, "Come, quick! Miss Huang has fallen into the quicksand." Guo Jing was

shocked, his legs squeezed his horse, and the little red horse shot like an arrow forward.

When he was still about a dozen 'zhang's away from where Ouyang Feng was standing, suddenly he felt his horse's hoofs no longer tread on a solid ground, as if under the white snow was some kind of marsh. The little red horse also felt it was stepping on a softer ground, hurriedly it pulled its leg and sped forward. Guo Jing brought the horse in a big circle and came back, only to see Ouyang Feng continuously running around a small tree.

"Is he doing some kind of black magic?" Guo Jing wondered. He pulled his rein to stop the horse because he wanted to ask a question; who would have thought that his little red horse did not want to stop, but sped forward and circled back. Guo Jing realized immediately, "Turned out underneath the snow is a soft-mud marsh; we will sink down as soon as I stop." But then his blood froze, "Is it possible that Rong'er fell into this marsh?"

"Where is Miss Huang?" he called out to Ouyang Feng.

Ouyang Feng did not stop running, he called out, "I followed her horse's track to this place, then suddenly it disappeared. Look!" While speaking he pointed his finger toward the small tree.

Guo Jing sped past the tree on the horseback, he saw a bright yellow ring on the tree branch. He made the little red horse run close to the tree, stretched out his hand and snatched that ring. It was the golden band Huang Rong wore on her hair. His heart almost jumped out through his throat.

He turned his horse's head toward the east. Several 'li's later he saw something glittering on the snow ahead. Bending his body, hanging from the horseback he stretched

his arm out and scooped that thing. It was the flower-patterned gold inlaid pearl head ornament that Huang Rong often wore. Guo Jing was very anxious, "Rong'er, Rong'er, where are you?" he shouted at the top of his lungs. He looked around as far as his eyes could see, but there was not a single movement on the vast and boundless white plain.

He went several 'li's further, toward his left he saw a black sable fur coat lying on the snowy ground. It was his own coat that he gave to Huang Rong when they first met at Zhangjiakou [Kalgan?]. He made the little red horse circle around the coat, while shouting loudly, "Rong'er!" His voice traveled far on the open snowy plain. There was no hill or mountain around, therefore, there was no echo answering his call. Guo Jing was extremely anxious, he wanted to cry but no sound was coming out from his throat.

A moment later Ouyang Feng arrived, "Let me rest on your horseback, then we will seek Miss Huang together," he said.

Guo Jing was indignant, "If you did not chase her, how could she fall into this marsh?" he scolded. Squeezing his legs he made his little red horse leap forward.

Ouyang Feng was angry, he leaped forward, and in three jumps he had already behind the horse, stretching his hand to grab the horse's tail.

Guo Jing did not expect him to come this quick, with a 'Divine Dragon Swings Its Tail' his right palm shot backward, crashing Ouyang Feng's palm, both people were using their full strength. Guo Jing was blown by Ouyang Feng's palm strength, his body flew from his saddle. Fortunately his red horse dashed forward; he stretched his left hand, grabbing the horse's buttocks, and swinging his body forward he was back on his saddle in no time.

Ouyang Feng, on the other hand, was pushed two steps backwards. Because of Guo Jing's palm strength he landed heavily; his left leg unexpectedly fell deeply into the mud, straight to his knee. Ouyang Feng was totally shocked; he knew on this kind of quicksand, as soon as he exerted his strength and tried to jump out, his right foot would also fall into the mud. Once both legs were in, it did not matter if his skill was as high as the sky, he would have a very difficult time pulling his own body out of the mud. In desperation he laid his body horizontally on the ground, then rolled around while at the same time kicked his right leg to the air. Using 'lian huan yuan yang tui' [chain mandarin duck's leg] he borrowed the strength from his right kick to lift his left foot. Mud splashed everywhere, but his legs were free.

He turned over and stood up, only to hear Guo Jing's loud calls, "Rong'er! Rong'er!" The man on the horse had left him for more than a 'li'. He saw the little red horse was running steadily; apparently they were already out of the marsh area. Ouyang Feng decided to pursue, but the further he ran, the more he felt the ground underneath his feet was getting softer; as if he was at the edge of the marsh and now he had treaded into the center of it.

Three times had Ouyang Feng fallen under Guo Jing's hands; the last time he was forced to be naked in front of hundreds of thousands people. It was an extremely dangerous situation; other people might admire his martial art skill, but he actually thought that was his greatest disgrace. This time he met Guo Jing again, alone. Good or bad he simply had to seek revenge. Even though the terrain was dangerous, he simply could not let this good opportunity pass. Much less Huang Rong's life or death was still unknown; he could not give up in light of this, no way; therefore, in his anger he decided to pursue Guo Jing.

Displaying his excellent lightness kungfu; in just several 'li's he had reached the speed of a fast horse. Guo Jing heard footsteps on the snow behind him; he turned his head quickly only to see Ouyang Feng was only several 'zhang's behind his horse's tail. He was startled, hastily urged his horse to run faster. In just a short moment they have covered more than a dozen 'li's.

Guo Jing did stop calling, "Rong'er!" but he saw the sky was getting darker; Huang Rong's fate was increasingly uncertain. His voice was hoarse from shouting, his occasional choke turned into sobs. The little red horse understood the danger they were on from the start, as it felt softer ground underneath, it ran even faster; eventually its four hooves moved so fast as if they were flying above the snow.

'Han xue bao ma' [precious horse with blood-like sweats] was a rare animal capable of running very fast; but Ouyang Feng's lightness kungfu was not inferior. Unfortunately he was getting tired, after running for a long time his breathing was getting heavier, his legs' strength diminished, his footsteps gradually slowing down. Little red horse was also sweating profusely; beads of red sweats trickled down from its body, splashing to the white snow below, next to its hoof tracks, like cherry blossom in full bloom.

By the time the sky was completely dark the little red horse had completely left the marsh; early on Ouyang Feng had disappeared without a trace. Guo Jing thought, "The horse Rong'er was riding did not have this kind of divine speed; it wouldn't run for half a li into the marsh without falling into the mud below. Even if I have to lose my life I must try to rescue her." He very well realized that Huang Rong had been missing for a very long time; if she did fall into the marsh, even if he could pull her out, he would not be able to

bring her back to life. So his motivation was really for his own peace of mind.

Guo Jing dismounted his horse to give it a rest; caressing his horse's back he said, "Little horse, oh little horse, today I am asking you not to be afraid of exhaustion. Let's take a short rest and then we'll go again."

Guo Jing leaped back to his saddle and pulled the rein to turn the horse's head. The little red horse was afraid to tread back into the marsh, but Guo Jing kept urging it to go. Finally with a loud neigh the horse's four hooves splashed back into the marsh. The horse knew their destination was still far away, so it ran with all its might, faster and faster into the marsh.

Suddenly they heard Ouyang Feng's desperate cry, "Help! Help!" Guo Jing sped his horse up. Under the glimmering reflection of the white snow he saw Ouyang Feng had fallen into the mud. His hands were high in the air, flailing chaotically. The mud was slowly rising, it already reached his chest. As soon as it reached his mouth and nose, he would certainly be suffocated to death.

Guo Jing could see his desperate situation; he recalled Huang Rong might face similar danger. His blood boiled inside his chest; he almost dismounted his horse and fell into the same trap; but decided against doing so at the last minute.

"Quick, help me!" Ouyang Feng cried out.

Guo Jing gritted his teeth and said, "You killed my benevolent masters, you also killed Miss Huang; do you still want me to save you? Dream on!"

With a stern voice Ouyang Feng replied, "We had made an agreement, you have to spare my life three times. This is

the third time. Are you saying you don't give a thought to the good faith?"

With tears in his eyes Guo Jing said, "Miss Huang is no longer alive, what use is our agreement?"

Ouyang Feng shouted curse and abusive words, but Guo Jing simply ignored him; he rode his horse away. Only a dozen 'zhang's later he heard Ouyang Feng's pitiful cry. Guo Jing could not bear it anymore. He heaved a sigh and turned his horse around. The mud had already reached Ouyang Feng's neck. "I am willing to save you, but if both of us ride on this horse, we will sink into the mud together," he said.

"Use a rope to tow me," Ouyang Feng suggested. Guo Jing did not carry any rope, but he remembered his long robe. Grabbing one end, he let his horse ran close to Ouyang Feng. Ouyang Feng held out his hand and grabbed the other end. Guo Jing squeezed his legs and gave a loud shout. The little red horse furiously charged forward and with a loud splashing sound Ouyang Feng was pulled out of the mire and dragged along on the snowy ground.

If they were heading east, very soon they were going to leave the marsh area; but Guo Jing was very anxious over Huang Rong, how would he be willing to give up searching for her? Therefore, they were galloping to the west. Ouyang Feng was still holding on to the robe, he laid down facing up, being dragged rapidly on the snow. He used this opportunity to catch his breath.

The little red horse ran very fast, before daybreak they had crossed the marsh. Guo Jing saw horse's track on the snow; it was Huang Rong's horse entering the marsh area. The track was still there, but what about Huang Rong? Guo Jing dismounted his horse, stood on the snow, lost in thought.



In his grief he had completely forgotten his archenemy; he stood with his left hand holding the rein, and his right hand holding the fur coat, his eyes gazing into the distance, his heart was shaken, beating rapidly.

Suddenly he felt a light touch on his shoulder. He turned around in shock, only to see Ouyang Feng's palm was touching his 'tao dao' [pottery way] acupoint. When Ouyang Feng fell into Guo Jing's trap and he came out from the sand, Guo Jing had sealed his 'tao dao' acupoint. This time Ouyang Feng managed to do the same to Guo Jing, it was a pay back time; Ouyang Feng could not help but laugh merrily.

Guo Jing was overwhelmed with grief, he had no regard of his life anymore; "If you want to kill me then just kill me; we don't have any agreement that you should spare my life anyway," he wryly said.

Ouyang Feng was taken aback; he had thought of torturing Guo Jing to disgrace him before finally taking his life. Who would have thought that Guo Jing did not expect to live? Ouyang Feng thought, "This dumb kid loves that little girl very much; if I kill him, then I am helping him fulfilling his desire to die together in the name of love." He changed his mind and thought, "That little girl is already buried beneath this snow; he becomes my only hope of the explanation of the manual." Grabbing Guo Jing's arm he lifted him up and leaped to the horseback. They rode toward a valley in the south.

About the sixth hour [between 9 - 11 am] he saw a village by the roadside. Ouyang Feng steered the horse to enter the village, but everywhere he looked there were corpses scattered around the village. Because the weather was cold, the corpses were preserved; they looked exactly like the day they were mutilated and killed by the passing

Mongolian army. Ouyang Feng called out several times, but nobody answered; looked like everybody in that village had died. Instead, he heard cattle mooing and sheep bleating. Ouyang Feng was delighted. He took Guo Jing to a stone house and said, "You are my prisoner now. I won't kill you. If you can defeat me, you are free to go." Having said that he took a sheep, butchered it, and boiled it in the kitchen.

The more Guo Jing saw his smug expression, the more he hated Ouyang Feng. Ouyang Feng threw a mutton leg to him and said, "I'll wait until your stomach is full, then we'll fight."

Guo Jing was angry, "You want to fight then fight. Why wait for the full stomach?" His body flew, his palm hacked down. Ouyang Feng raised his hand to block then sent out a fist to counterattack.

Very soon they were fighting inside the stone house, among upturned table and broken chairs. About thirty stances later Guo Jing had to admit his inferiority; he was half a step in front of Ouyang Feng when Ouyang Feng's right palm swung onto his side. It was very difficult for Guo Jing to fend off, all he could do was to wait for his death. Unexpectedly Ouyang Feng did not exert any strength; he laughed and said, "It's enough for today. You go ahead and train martial art from the manual; tomorrow we'll fight again."

"Bah!" Guo Jing spat; he sat on an overturned chair, picked the mutton leg up and started to eat. He thought, "He wanted to see me using the martial art from the manual, so that he might observe and steal it. I won't be fooled. If he wants to kill me, let him kill ... Hmm, his swing just now, how would I block it?"

Thinking about all kinds of fist techniques and palm methods in the manual, he could not find a single move capable of blocking Ouyang Feng's attack. He did remember, however, that there was a technique in the manual called 'fei xu jin' [flying cotton strength], which would allow him to strengthen his back and render Ouyang Feng's attack useless.

"I'd better train internal strength; even if he wants to see it, he can't," Guo Jing thought. Immediately he ate the mutton leg clean then sat cross-legged on the ground; he recited the manual in his heart then started practicing according to the manual. Since mastering the 'yi jin duan gu pian' [changing muscle forging bone technique], his foundation was getting stronger; moreover, with what Reverend Yideng had taught him the Manual became like a second nature to him. This 'fei xu jin' for instance, in less than four hours he had learned how to use it.

With the corner of his eye he looked at Ouyang Feng, who was also sitting quietly, meditating. "Watch out!" Guo Jing called out. Without standing up his palm hacked down on the enemy.

Ouyang Feng parried the attack while sending out a counterattack. He wanted to repeat his earlier stance toward Guo Jing's side. But to his surprise his palm slid down Guo Jing's back, slanting to one side; because of his own strength he was slightly propelled forward. Taking that opportunity Guo Jing's left palm shot toward his neck.

Ouyang Feng was startled and pleased at the same time; he continued moving forward and thus had evaded the attack. He turned around and called out, "Good move! Was it from the Manual? What is it called?"

"Sha cha yi tui, ai mo qin er," Guo Jing said.

Ouyang Feng was startled, but then he remembered the weird sentences from the manual. He thought, "This dumb kid has a profound strength, but he is as hardheaded as a bull. I have to trick him since brute force will be useless." Changing his tactic he fought Guo Jing carefully.

Two people fought without ceasing. As soon as Guo Jing lost they would stop, then Guo Jing would train himself in new stances. Guo Jing slept soundly during the nights, but Ouyang Feng slept with trepidation; he was afraid Guo Jing might attack him in the middle of the night, or that he would try to escape in the dark.

They lived like that in the stone house for over a month, and had eaten almost half of the cattle and sheep in the village. Within this one month Guo Jing was forced to train his martial art, while Ouyang Feng tried hard to steal it. What Ouyang Feng had learned was already profound, but when he verified what he saw at Guo Jing, he realized there were many discrepancies; it was very difficult from him to link from one sentence to the next. The more he pondered, the more he did not understand; and he could not get anything from Guo Jing. In the meantime, within this month Guo Jing's martial art had unexpectedly advanced by leaps and bounds.

Ouyang Feng could not help but secretly anxious, "If we continue like this, before I understand the essence of the manual, I might not be this dumb kid's match."

The first several days Guo Jing was filled with hatred; after every fight he would be more determined than ever to score a victory, he wanted to master a fierce martial art to kill his enemy. However, he soon learned that this matter was extremely difficult. He was not discouraged nonetheless; his anger had decreased somewhat, but his firm resolution had actually increased.

One day he picked a steel sword from among the corpses lying around in the village; then trained hard on swordsmanship to fight Ouyang Feng's wooden staff.

Ouyang Feng's original snake staff fell and was lost in the ocean when he was fighting Hong Qigong on the boat. Afterwards he made another cast steel staff complete with new pair of strange snake; but it was also lost when he was trapped inside the ice block, destroyed by Lu Youjiao. Right now he was using an ordinary wooden staff, without any assistance from his strange snakes; but his staff technique was still out-of-this-world, with infinite variations. Several times the staff shook the sword in Guo Jing's hand and made it fly. If there were snakes on his staff, definitely Guo Jing would not be able to resist at all.

In the meantime they heard Genghis Khan's army returning to the east; the people and the horses were marching noisily, the noise did not stop for several days. But two people were engrossed in fighting each other violently, they did not pay the slightest attention to this. One evening the noise simply stopped, the army had all gone and nothing was heard except the quietness of the night.

Guo Jing raised his sword straight up, thinking, "Although I can't win over you tonight, your wooden staff won't shake my sword in any way." He was anxious to try the new stance he had just learned, but he waited calmly for the opponent to attack first. Suddenly from outside the house somebody was shouting loudly, "Traitor! Where are you running to?" Guo Jing was absolutely certain it was the Old Urchin Zhou Botong's voice.

Ouyang Feng and Guo Jing looked at each other in bewilderment, they both thought, "Why did he go thousands of miles to the west?" They wanted to say something, but heard footsteps came approaching; then

two people, one after another, rushed toward the stone house. There were numerous other buildings in the village, but apparently they saw that firelight came from this house.

Ouyang Feng waved his left hand and with his internal strength extinguished the fire. By that time the front door was shoved open, somebody rushed in, with somebody else hot on his heels; the latter one was indeed Zhou Botong. Both men's footsteps were extraordinarily light and nimble; the man in the front's martial art certainly not below Zhou Botong's.

Ouyang Feng marveled greatly, "This man surprisingly able to escape the Old Urchin's hand. His skill is very rare among the experts of this generation. If it were Huang Yaoshi or Hong Qigong, the Old Poison won't be so surprised." Because of this thought he refrained from making any move.

They heard the man in the front jump vertically up and sat on the beam. Zhou Botong laughed, "The Old Urchin's favorite game is the hide-and-seek; I won't let you slip away anymore." In the darkness they heard him closing down the front door, and placed a nearby big rock behind it. He called out, "Stinky thief, where are you?" At the same time he groped around back and forth to find him.

Guo Jing was thinking of making some noise to tell him the enemy was on the beam, when suddenly Zhou Botong leaped high while laughing loudly, grabbing that man on the beam. Turned out he was aware from the start that his enemy was on the beam. He was deliberately groping around to the east and to the west to throw him off guard, then suddenly launched a sudden attack.

The man on the beam was not weak either; without waiting for Zhou's fingers to touch him he somersaulted and

crouched by the north wall. Even though his mouth was babbling nonsense, but Zhou Botong was actually very wary of this man. He stopped to listen to his exact location; did not dare to act rashly. In the quietness of the night he heard three distinct breathings. He had known from the start that this house must be occupied, since he saw the fire was extinguished. But since they did not make any sound, he thought they must be frightened; thereupon he called out, "Master of the house please don't be afraid, I am here to capture this little thief. Once I get him I will go out immediately."

He knew ordinary people's breathing was rough and heavy, while those with strong internal energy would breathe slowly and long, light and deep; with just a little attention they were very easy to distinguish. But when he cocked his ears to listen, the people toward his north, east and west were all breathing low and slowly.

Zhou Botong was greatly surprised, "Traitor," he called out, "You have prepared an ambush here!"

Guo Jing wanted to open his mouth to greet him, but changed his mind at the last minute; he thought, "Ouyang Feng is lurking on the side, the man Zhou Dage [Big Brother Zhou] is chasing is another powerful enemy. I'd better stay quiet and wait for a good opportunity to help him."

Zhou Botong moved step by step toward the front door while mumbling, "Looked like before the Old Urchin can capture the enemy, he would be captured by the enemy." He had made a decision to dash out the door if the situation was unfavorable. Right at that moment came a rumbling noise from a distance; hoof beats sounded like an evening tide came crashing the shore. It looked like a strong army with multitude of horses had arrived to kill.

Zhou Botong called out, "You have more and more helpers coming, the Old Urchin doesn't want to play anymore." While saying that he picked the rock stopping the door as if he was about to open the door and leave; but then suddenly he hurled the rock toward the man he chased. The rock was not light; Ouyang Feng placed that rock behind the door every night, so that if Guo Jing wanted to sneak out he would find out even when he was sleeping.

Ouyang Feng heard the wind carried a lot of strength in it, he thought that when the Old Urchin threw the stone, his right flank must have been defenseless; if he attacked him first, not only he would have one less enemy for the present time, but also during the second Sword Meet of Mount Hua he would have one less powerful contestant. Having this intention he bent his knee, slightly squatting, pushed both hands together to launch a 'Toad Stance' attack.

He was squatting on the west, therefore, his attack was toward the east, carrying a very strong energy. Guo Jing had fought him for dozens of days, he knew by heart Ouyang Feng's every action and every movement even though the room was pitch black. As soon as he heard the gust of wind, he knew Ouyang Feng was attacking Zhou Botong. Guo Jing stepped forward and launched the 'Proud Dragon Repents' to meet Ouyang Feng's 'Toad Stance' head-on.

In the meantime the man who was standing on the north also heard the big rock was flying his way; he bent his knees to get a stronger stand, and push both hands forward, creating a strong force striking the big rock.

Four people from four directions sending out four forces; even though they did not release their energy at exactly the same time, but the forces were actually not inferior one to another. The big rock was struck by forces from east, south,



west and north; it fell on the center of the room. 'Crash!' with a loud noise it broke the table to smithereens.

The sound was actually very loud; which Zhou Botong thought amusing. He could not restrain from bursting into loud laughter. But his laughter was drowned by the sound of thousands of cavalry soldiers entering the village. They could hear the warhorses neighing, the weapons clashing, and the soldiers shouting their battle cry.

Guo Jing listened to the officers' commands, and he found out they were the defeated army of Khoresm entering the village, perhaps trying to hold their ground in the village; but it sounded like the Mongolian army had pursued them. He heard the hoof beats, the sound of battle flag fluttered in the wind, the loud battle cry, as well as flying arrows near and far. It sounded like the armies were engaged in a close hand-to-hand combat. The four people in the house did not know for certain how many soldiers were fighting outside. Suddenly someone shoved the door open and came in. Zhou Botong grabbed that person and flung him back outside; then he lifted the rock and placed it back behind the door.

As Ouyang Feng's attack failed, he thought that he had been discovered anyway, so he called out, "Old Urchin, do you know who I am?"

Zhou Botong indistinctly heard someone speaking, but because of the noise he could not distinguish who the speaker was. He raised his left hand to guard against an attack while stretching his right hand to grab. Ouyang Feng easily neutralized this grab with his right hand, while slapping with the back of his left hand. Zhou Botong parried this attack, he was startled, "The Old Poison! You are here?" he called out. He swayed his body slightly, leaning to the left. At that very moment the man on the north took the opportunity to attack Zhou Botong's back.

Zhou Botong's right hand engaged Ouyang Feng, while his left fist parried the attack to his back. He was thinking of testing the mutual hands combat that he created on the Peach Blossom Island. Until that day Zhou Botong had not tested his special skill against two masters; so even though he was in danger, he could not let this good opportunity to pass. But suddenly Guo Jing from the east threw himself into the fight; his right hand parried Zhou Botong's fist, while his left hand engaged that person's attack.

Three people simultaneously called out in alarm; Zhou Botong shouted, "Guo Xiongdi [Brother Guo]," that person shouted, "Guo Jing," and Guo Jing himself cried out, "Qiu Qianren."

Zhou Botong was scared by the snakes at the martial art contest at the 'yan yu lou' [Misty Rain Tavern]; he saw no way to escape, so he laid down on top of the tavern's roof, using layers upon layers of split-bamboo sheets to cover up his body. Because his 'armor' was so thick no arrow could harm him, Ouyang Feng's vipers were also helpless to climb to the roof. When the morning fog was gone, the snakes, as well as the soldiers were also gone; so was everybody else, he did not know where they went. He was bored to death, so he just wandered around everywhere.

A few months later a Beggar Clan disciple delivered a letter to him; it was from Huang Rong. In the letter Huang Rong reminded him that he had promised no matter what Huang Rong asked, he would comply. Now Huang Rong wanted him to go kill the Clan Leader of the Iron Palm Clan, Qiu Qianren. She explained that Emperor Duan's Concubine Liu had a very deep enmity against this man; if he killed him, Concubine Liu would not look for him anymore. Otherwise, Concubine Liu would find him even to the end of the earth, to take him as her husband. Huang Rong also gave him the detail of the Iron Palm Peak's exact location.

Zhou Botong thought that his promise 'to comply no matter what' was actually given to Huang Rong; but that old scoundrel Qiu Qianren colluded with the Jins, he was a traitor, so he felt it was appropriate to kill him. As for his own affair with Concubine Liu, he realized he had offended her deeply; she had a deep enmity against Qiu Qianren, so if he lent her a hand, she might not come and bother him anymore, and that would be an awfully good luck for him. Therefore, he decided to go to the Iron Palm Peak.

At first Qiu Qianren was able to match him stance for stance, but as soon as Zhou Botong used the mutual hands combat technique, Qiu Qianren was forced to withdraw. When martial art masters contended, as soon as one admit inferiority, then victory or defeat should be decided; who would have thought that Zhou Botong did not want to stop and kept chasing him. Qiu Qianren did ask him the reason behind it several times, but Zhou Botong only looked at him with a blank expression; could not tell him the real reason. He only said three characters 'liu gui fei' [Concubine Liu]; and that would be enough to take his head.

Two men fought and stop, one ran away the other chased; they went farther and farther away. Zhou Botong's martial art was slightly superior to Qiu Qianren's; yet it would not be easy for him to kill Qiu Qianren. Qiu Qianren had tried any means possible to get rid of him; but Zhou Botong doggedly chased him anywhere he went. He thought, "Would you still chase me if I go to the bitter cold west?" On the other hand Zhou Botong thought, "I want to see where you would go; then I'll go back home."

As soon as they arrive at the desert outside the great wall, the landscape was flat, it was easy to follow someone's trail; Qiu Qianren did not have any place to hide. Fortunately Zhou Botong had shown a good faith toward him; whenever Qiu Qianren needed to sleep or sat down to eat his meal, or

perhaps he was having a bowel movement or urinating, Zhou Botong did not disturb him in any way; he simply did the same. But no matter what Qiu Qianren did, no matter how bad he cursed him, the Old Urchin haunted him like a ghost, continuously pestering him.

The more Zhou Botong fought Qiu Qianren, the more excited he became. Several times he did gain an upper hand, but unexpectedly he did not kill Qiu Qianren. That particular day, two men fought and ran and by a pure coincidence rushed into the stone building.

Now Zhou and Guo two people knew who the other three people were, but when the three of them called out each other's name, their voices were drown by the loud commotion outside; hence Ouyang Feng still did not know who the other person was. He only knew that person was Zhou Botong's enemy. On the other hand, Qiu Qianren thought the other two were on the same side.

Zhou, Qiu and Ouyang, all three people possessed outstanding martial art skills; but after battling Ouyang Feng for more than a month, Guo Jing's martial art level was also improving by leaps and bound, which enable him to keep pace with the other three. These four martial art masters were confined in a pitch-black, approximately two 'zhang's square room; they could not see a thing, could not hear each other, and could not talk to each other. It was as if they had turned into deaf, mute and blind people.

"If I block Ouyang Feng, then Zhou Dage can finish off Qiu Qianren. After that it won't be too difficult for us two people to join forces to kill Ouyang Feng," Guo Jing thought. Once he reached that decision, his hands started to move. His right hand hit an empty air, while his left palm met someone else's hand.

On the Peach Blossom Island Guo Jing had fought Zhou Botong countless of times; therefore, as soon as his palm touched Zhou's hand, he knew immediately it was his Zhou Dage, he retracted his palm quickly. Unexpectedly Zhou Botong's childlike enthusiasm was aroused; he slightly shrank his left arm then sent out a right fist toward Guo Jing's shoulder. This hit did not carry any strong internal energy, but since Guo Jing did not guard against it, he felt pain nonetheless.

"Hao Xiongdi [Good Brother], you want to test your Dage's martial art? Be careful!" Zhou Botong said, his left palm shot out. Guo Jing could not hear what he said, but this time he was prepared; he wielded his arms and neutralized the attack.

By this time Ouyang Feng and Qiu Qianren had also exchanged several stances; as a result they recognized the opponent by his martial art. These two men did not have any enmity against each other, but they both thought that the Sword Meet of Mount Hua was coming. Potentially they were going to fight a life and death battle against each other anyway; therefore, why not try to inflict as much damage as possible to the opponent since they have the opportunity now? Hence they did not slack one bit.

After fighting for a moment they felt gusts of wind blowing behind them, to their surprise Zhou Botong was fighting Guo Jing. They were bewildered, but then they remembered Zhou Botong always handled matters differently, he was an unpredictable man; besides, it gave them a good opportunity, why wouldn't they be happy? Thus without prior agreement they both attacked Zhou Botong and Guo Jing.

After exchanging more than a dozen moves with Guo Jing; Zhou Botong found out that Guo Jing's martial art was far

more advanced than what he had known, he was pleasantly surprised. "Xiongdi, where did you learn your martial art from?" he asked. But the noise outside was deafening, how could Guo Jing hear what he said? Zhou Botong was offended, "Fine, you don't want to tell me. Do you think I care?" Right at that moment he felt a gust of wind on his face, Ouyang and Qiu's attacks had arrived. Zhou Botong kicked the ground and leaped up to the beam. "I'll let you fight these two alone!" he called out.

Ouyang Feng and Qiu Qianren felt the wind from Zhou Botong's sleeves, they realized he had jumped to the beam; they had the same thought of joining forces and kill this dumb kid, suddenly Guo Jing had to face a converging attack from left and right.

Initially Guo Jing was surrounded by Zhou Botong's attacks; he had tried four, five different techniques but was unable to free himself. He was waiting for Zhou Botong to withdraw when two powerful enemies attacked; which forced him to groan inwardly. He had no choice but braced himself and used the mutual hands combat technique to resist these two.

After fighting for a while Ouyang Feng and Qiu Qianren were unable to restrain their amazement. Knowing Guo Jing's skill, either one of Ouyang Feng or Qiu Qianren should be able to defeat him easily. Who would have thought that after fighting two against one, Guo Jing's left palm could block Ouyang Feng's attacks, while his right fist thwarted Qiu's palms? Two people were helpless against one.

Zhou Botong was sitting on the beam; he had decided to get down, but was afraid Guo Jing might get hurt, so quietly he slid down the wall, stretching out both his hands arbitrarily, and by coincidence caught Ouyang Feng's back.

Ouyang Feng was squatting on the ground, ready to strike Guo Jing with his fierce Toad Stance; suddenly he felt somebody on his back, hastily he sent his palms backward. Guo Jing seized this opportunity to kick Qiu Qianren then leap to the corner of the house, gasping for breath. If Zhou Botong were one step late, he would be injured by Ouyang Feng's attack.

Four people in the pitch-black room clashed to each other then separated from each other. Sometimes Zhou Botong fought Qiu Qianren, sometimes Guo Jing fought Qiu Qianren, sometimes Ouyang Feng fought Qiu Qianren, sometimes Zhou Botong fought Ouyang Feng, and sometimes Guo Jing fought Zhou Botong. Four people engaged in this mixed-up fight, among them Zhou Botong was most excited; it was the most fun among all of his fights, of course he would not let this opportunity pass.

After fighting for a while an idea popped up in his head. "My two hands can be considered two people; Ouyang and Qiu are also two. See if you can fight four people at once. Have you ever tried this?" he asked Guo Jing.

Guo Jing did not hear what he said, but suddenly felt three people attack him at the same time; desperately he tried to block and evade. "Don't be afraid, don't be afraid," Zhou Botong encouraged him, "I will help you if you are in danger." But in this dark room, as soon as somebody sent out a fist or a kick, his life would be in grave danger; how could Zhou Botong have time to help?

A dozen or so stances later Guo Jing was already dead-tired; he felt Ouyang and Qiu, two people's fists were getting heavier and heavier, he was forced to step back one step after another. He wanted to jump up the beam to catch his breath, but Zhou Botong's palms did not give him any slack. He was both alarmed and angry, finally he lost his

patience, "Zhou Dage, you silly old man, why do you bother me?" but his words were drowned by the commotion outside, nobody heard him.

Guo Jing withdrew several more steps, suddenly his feet knocked the big rock on the ground; he nearly tumbled down. Before he had any chance to straighten up his waist, Qiu Qianren's iron palm was ready to slap him down. In this dire situation Guo Jing did not lose his wit, swiftly he picked the big rock up and held it in front of his chest. Qiu Qianren's palm hit the rock. Guo Jing focused his strength on his arms and pushed the rock forward to meet the attack. Suddenly he felt gust of wind coming from his left; Ouyang Feng's palm had arrived. With a loud shout Guo Jing threw the big rock upward, while he jumped sideways to evade the attack.

The big rock flew through the roof; bricks and plasters fell down like rain. Immediately the stars in the sky above cast a dim light through the hole. Zhou Botong was angry, "Look what you did! Now we lost all the fun!"

Guo Jing was extremely exhausted; he kicked the ground and jumped out through the hole. Ouyang Feng hastily flew up to chase him. Zhou Botong shouted, "Don't go! Don't go! Stay here and play with me." He stretched out his hand to grab Ouyang Feng's left foot. Ouyang Feng was startled, quickly his right foot kicked, forcing Zhou Botong's hand to let go; but as a result he could not jump and was forced to land back down.

Qiu Qianren did not wait for him to land, he sent out a kick toward Ouyang Feng's chest. Ouyang Feng slightly pulled his chest back while stretching out his arm to grab Qiu Qianren's ankle. Three people once again engaged in a fierce battle against each other. This time they could vaguely see each other's shadow; while the battle noise



outside was also gradually diminishing. The thrill of the fight decreased substantially.

Zhou Botong was upset, he lost his interest; he vented his disappointment toward these two people. His fist technique changed abruptly, he fought the two people with murderous intention.

After escaping from the house via the roof, Guo Jing saw the troops and horses running around swiftly; he could also hear the sound of clashing weapons in a distance. Oftentimes he heard heart-rending groan and cry of soldiers wounded by blades or arrows. He dashed through these miserable people, running toward a small wood outside the village to lie down and take some rest.

He had fought fiercely for half a night, as he lay down, he felt his whole body, muscles and bones were aching, like they were going to crack. Recalling the fight inside that stone house, he shivered involuntarily. Although worried about Zhou Botong's safety, but with his martial art level he knew even if he came back there he would not be able to help Zhou escape. Finally he closed his eyes and fell into a deep sleep.

Early morning the next day he felt his face was wet and cold, something was wiggling around on his face. Startled he opened his eyes and leaped up, only to listen to a happy neighing sound. Turned out it was his little red horse licking his face. Guo Jing was delighted, immediately he hugged the horse's neck; one man and one horse embraced in a joyful reunion.

When Guo Jing was held captive by Ouyang Feng, the red horse was let loose outside; it went grazing on the nearby prairie. During the fierce battle last night the horse utilized

its swift legs to escape. When the soldiers were gone, the horse came back and found its master.

Guo Jing led the red horse returned to the village only to see broken bows and arrows everywhere, dead soldiers and horses scattered all around. Here and there he saw injured soldiers who were still alive, crying out pitifully. He had been in a lot of battles, he was accustomed to dead or wounded soldiers; but recalling his own life experience he could not refrain from feeling a great sorrow.

Quietly he returned to the stone building. Cocking his ears outside he tried to listen, but the house was quiet. He took a peek through a crack in the door and saw no one inside. He pushed the door open to see; but Zhou Botong, Ouyang Feng, and Qiu Qianren three people had already disappeared without any trace.

He stared blankly for half a day then mounted his horse heading east. The little red horse ran very fast, very soon they caught up with Genghis Khan's main army.

By this time Khoresm cities had either surrendered or been destroyed; hundreds of thousand warriors had fallen like broken tiles. Khoresm king, Muhammad, was a haughty tyrant; he was deserted by his friends and allies. He led the remnants of his defeated army desperately escape to the west. Genghis Khan assigned his senior generals, Subotai and Jebeh to lead twenty thousand soldiers to pursue to the west; while he led the main army went home to the east.

Subotai and Jebeh pursued to the west of modern day city of Moscow, to the city of Kiev nearby the bank of Dnieper River. They crushed several hundred thousands of Russia and Kipchak alliance army; destroyed the city of Kiev and killed the Hertog [Grand Duke] of Kiev along with eleven princes by running a chariot over them. This war was called

'The Battle of the Kalka River'. Since then the Russian prairie groaned under the Mongolian horses' hoofs.

Muhammad went as far west as he could, finally he escaped to a deserted island on the Caspian Sea and died of illness there.

When suddenly Guo Jing disappeared at Samarkhand, Genghis Khan was very worried. He was afraid that Guo Jing somehow got killed in the chaotic battle without anybody knowing it. Seeing him return safe and sound he was really thrilled. Needless to say, Princess Huazheng was even more overjoyed.

Qiu Chuji followed the main army went back to the east. Along the way he was always giving advice to the Great Khan to love the people more and kill innocent civilians less. Although Genghis Khan did not necessarily agree with his view, he realized the Priest spoke reasonably, hence he did not argue too much. In the chaotic battles that followed, Qiu Chuji had succeeded in saving innumerable civilians' lives.

Khoresm was located tens of thousands of 'li's from Mongolia; the return of Genghis Khan's army to the east took a very long time. As soon as they arrived back home, he held a big feast to celebrate their victory by the bank of Onon River; while giving the injured soldiers time to recuperate. Qiu Chuji and his disciples, along with Lu Youjiao and the rest of the Beggar Clan disciples took their leave and went back to the south.

Several months later Genghis Khan saw his warriors had eaten to their hearts' contents, their horses galloped freely on the prairie; his interest to attack the south was rekindled. One day he held a general assembly to discuss strategies to defeat the Jin country.

Ever since Huang Rong's death, Guo Jing was broken hearted; oftentimes he went riding alone with only his little red horse and his pair of eagles to keep him company, wandering the vast Mongolian prairie. Most of the time he would just stare blankly and not say anything for a few days. Princess Huazheng was always trying to speak warmly to him, but it seemed like he did not hear anything she said. Everybody knew his feelings, knew that he was grieving, so nobody dared to bring up the wedding plan; while Genghis Khan was busy preparing the expedition to the south and did not pay attention to this matter.

That day at the general assembly inside the Great Khan's Golden Tent, many generals proposed various tactics and strategies to attack the south; yet Guo Jing did not utter a single word.

After dismissing his generals, Genghis Khan went to the top of a small hill and stayed there for half a day, to think of the actions he would take. The next day he dispatched his army to attack the Jins from three directions. At that moment his eldest son Jochi and his second son Chagatai were still busy consolidating their conquests in the west; therefore, he put the main army to take the Jins down under his third son, Ogedei; while the left flank was placed under the command of his fourth son, Tuolei, and the right flank was placed under Guo Jing's command.

Genghis Khan summoned the three commander-in-chiefs privately; he even ordered his personal guards to leave the tent. To Ogedei, Tuolei and Guo Jing he said, "The Jins concentrate their defense in the city of Tongguan; the city is bordered on the south by a mountain and on the north by a river, it really is difficult to break. Numerous generals' proposals all have some ground to them, but if we advance frontally, unavoidably we will waste a lot of time. Currently our Mongolia has formed an alliance with the Great Song; I

think the best strategy would be advancing through the Song territory. From Tangzhou the army to proceed via Dengzhou straight to the Jin capital Daliang.”

As Ogedei, Tuolei and Guo Jing three people heard to this point, they jumped and hugged each other, loudly shouted, “Ingenious plan!”

Genghis Khan smiled and asked Guo Jing, “You are very good in battle strategy; truly a man after my own heart. Let me ask you, after attacking Daliang, then what?”

Guo Jing contemplated for a while then shook his head, “We are not attacking Daliang,” he said.

Ogedei and Tuolei clearly heard their father king said they were going to attack Daliang, why did Guo Jing say they were not going to? They were startled and looked at him with a questioning look. Genghis Khan still showed a faint smile on his face, “Not attacking Daliang, then what?” he asked.

“Not attacking is actually attacking; attack but do not attack, do not attack but attack,” Guo Jing said. He made Ogedei and Tuolei more confused than ever.

“Attack but do not attack, do not attack but attack [gong er bu gong, bu gong er gong],” Genghis Khan smiled, “These eight characters were very well said. Explain it to your two brothers.”

Guo Jing complied. “I can guess the Great Khan’s troops advancement method; we pretend to attack the Jin capital, destroying the enemy under the city wall. Daliang is where the Jin Emperor resides, but the troops stationed there are actually not too many. As soon as it is under attack, the Jins will immediately send troops from the neighboring city Tongguan to rescue. Chinese military strategist said, ‘A

massive troops movement can't be done in a day; traveling hundreds of 'li's is draining the energy and crippling the three generals. Strong at first, weary in the end. This is the eleventh method.' By traveling fast for a hundred 'li's, the soldiers strength will be reduced to only 10% of their original strength. As they leave Tongguan and go to Daliang, the great distance is their biggest disadvantage; they should take ten rest stops, but can only take one instead. Even if they reach Daliang on time, they will be weary and unable to fight. Our troops simply have to wait for the exhausted enemy then we can easily destroy the Jin army. Once the strong Jin army is defeated, then Daliang will fall. If we concentrate on directly attacking Daliang, not only it will be difficult, but we can be attacked from both front and rear."

Genghis Khan clapped his hands and laughed aloud, he called out, "Well said, well said!" He pulled a scroll out and spread it on the table. Three people looked at it and were greatly astonished. Turned out it was the map of Daliang and its neighboring area. On it were drawn routes of troop's movement, both theirs and the enemy's. It also contained strategies on how to attack the enemy's rear flank, how to attack the enemy's main body, how to lure and destroy the incoming enemies from Tongguan, how to make them weary and obliterate them outside the city wall; everything was just as Guo Jing had said.

Ogedei and Tuolei looked at their father king, also looked at Guo Jing with bewilderment and admiration on their face. Guo Jing's heart was also full of admiration, he thought, "I learned the military strategy from the 'Wumu Legacy', nothing strange about it; but the Great Khan is illiterate, he possesses a natural ability for this kind of things."

Genghis Khan continued, "In our expedition to the south this time, I am sure the Jins will be destroyed. I have here

three embroidered pouches for each one of you. After Daliang falls, the three of you should gather inside the imperial palace of the Jin emperor; you can open them up and act accordingly.” Upon saying that he took those embroidered pouches from his pocket and gave one to each of them.

As Guo Jing received the pouch, he saw that the mouth was sealed with wax and the seal carried the image of Genghis Khan’s signet ring.

“Before entering Daliang, I forbid you to open the pouch without authorization,” Genghis Khan said, “Before you open them, I want the three of you to examine each other’s pouch to see if the seal is damaged.”

The three of them bowed and said, “Who dare to defy The Great Khan’s decree?”

Genghis Khan asked Guo Jing, “You are usually slow in dealing everyday affairs; but how come you are so resourceful in dealing with military strategy?” Guo Jin then told him how he studied the military strategy from the ‘Wumu Legacy’. Genghis Khan asked him the life story of Yue Fei. Guo Jing told him how Yue Fei scored a big victory over the Jins at the ‘zhu xian zhen’ [vermillion immortal small town]; that the Jins gave him a nickname, ‘Yue Yeye’ [grandfather Yue]; that they had a saying, ‘shaking a mountain is easy, shaking Yue’s army is difficult’; Guo Jing recounted everything.

Genghis Khan was silent, carrying his hands behind his back he paced back and forth inside his tent; sighing, “I regret I was not born a hundred years earlier to befriend this great hero. In this world today, who can be my rival?” His words carried a great loneliness.

As he was leaving the Golden Tent, Guo Jing remembered that in the past several days he had been busy with military business and did not spend as much time with his mother as he should. Since the next day he was going south leading the troops to avenge his country, the Great Song, against its archenemy, the Jin; today he wanted to spend as much time with his mother as he could. Hence he immediately headed toward his mother's tent.

To his surprise, the tent was empty, all her clothes and other belongings were moved someplace else; only an old soldier stayed there on guard duty. He asked the soldier, and was told that the madam surnamed Li had received the Great Khan's order to move to another tent. Guo Jing asked where the new tent was, and quickly walked over. He was surprised to see the tent was several times bigger than the one she used to live in. He lifted the curtain to enter, and he was even more surprised; the tent was full of gold, jade, and precious jewels, as well as fancy clothes and embroidery works; they were all the spoils of Mongolian army's military expedition.

Princess Huazheng was sitting next to Li Ping, listening to her story about Guo Jing's childhood. As she saw Guo Jing enter, she smiled, stood up and greeted him.

"Ma [mother], where did all these things come from?" Guo Jing asked.

"The Great Khan says you have rendered a great service in the west; therefore, he bestowed all of these for you to enjoy," Li Ping answered. "Actually, we are simple people and have no use of these extravagances."

Guo Jing nodded, he also saw there were more than eight maids attending to his mother's needs; they were also captives that the troops seized.



After making some idle talk with Guo Jing and his mother for a while, Huazheng took her leave. She thought Guo Jing would leave for another long journey the next day, so he must have had a lot to talk about with her today. Who would have thought that after waiting outside the tent for half a day Guo Jing did not come out. Li Ping understood, she said, "Jing'er, Princess is waiting for you outside, you need to say goodbye to her."

Guo Jing replied in affirmative, but did not budge from his chair. Li Ping sighed, "We have lived in this northern country for twenty years. Although we have received the Great Khan's benevolence like we are part of his family, but actually I miss my hometown very much. I hope you can defeat the Jin country soon, so that we, mother and son, will be able to return to our hometown. We can live in the Ox Village, where your father's home used to be. I know you are not greedy of fame and fortune, so you don't need to go back north. Only this business with the Princess, I don't know how to deal with; it is a really difficult matter."

"Your son had early on told the Princess, that if Rong'er died, your son will never marry for the rest of my life," Guo Jing said.

Li Ping sighed, "Perhaps the Princess can accept that, but what worries me most is the Great Khan."

"What about the Great Khan?" Guo Jing asked.

"These past few days the Great Khan all of a sudden treats us, mother and child, with an unusual kindness," Li Ping answered, "He showered us with money, precious jewels, everything. He said it was your reward from the expedition to the west, but I have lived in this northern Mongolian desert for twenty years, I know the Great Khan's

personality. I feel like there is more to it than what meets the eye."

"Ma," Guo Jing said, "What do you think it is?"

"I am just a simple woman, how could I have a respected opinion?" Li Ping said, "But if my intuition is right, the Great Khan wants to compel us to do something for him."

"Hmm, perhaps he wants me to marry the Princess," Guo Jing guessed.

"Getting married is a good thing," Li Ping answered, "Even if the Great Khan does not know your feeling, he does not need to compel you. The way I see it, you are commanding a big army to the south; maybe the Great Khan is afraid you will have a change of heart and rebel against him."

Guo Jing shook his head, "I have no intention to gain riches and honor, and the Great Khan knew it. Why would I rebel against him?"

"I have an idea," Li Ping said, "We will find out quietly what the Great Khan's real intention is. Tell him that I miss my hometown very much, and want to go along to the south with you. Tell him that, see what he would say."

Guo Jing was delighted, "Ma, why didn't you say so earlier? We go home together, that will be wonderful! I am sure the Great Khan will give his permission." He went out the tent and did not see Huazheng outside. He thought perhaps she had waited for a while and could not wait much longer.

Guo Jing was gone for half a day, and he came back dejected. "The Great Khan did not give us his permission, did he?" Li Ping asked.

"I don't understand," Guo Jing replied, "Why would the Great Khan want to keep you here?" Li Ping was silent.

“The Great Khan said,” Guo Jing continued, “That as soon as the Jin country is defeated, he will let me take you home; we will return with all the glory and honor. Why would I want that? I said mother misses her home very much and wants to go home sooner. The Great Khan suddenly looked angry, he kept shaking his head, did not give us his permission.”

Li Ping hesitated. “What else did the Great Khan say to you today?” she asked.

Guo Jing told her everything that happened inside the Golden Tent earlier, how he received his assignment, including the secret order he received inside the embroidered pouch.

“Ay!” Li Ping sighed, “If only your Second Master and Rong’er were here, they should be able to shed some lights on this matter. It’s a pity I am only a simple country girl. The more I think about it, the more restless I became; I don’t know why.”

Guo Jing played with the embroidered pouch in his hand; he said, “When the Great Khan gave this embroidered pouch, his face looked unusual. I am afraid it has something to do with this secret order.”

Li Ping took the embroidered pouch from his hand; she looked at it carefully, then she dismissed all the maids and suddenly said, “Let’s open it up and take a look.”

Guo Jing was shocked, “No! Breaking the royal seal means death.”

Li Ping smiled, “Do you know that the embroidery work of the Lin’an prefecture is well-known throughout the world? Your mother is a Lin’an native, I have learned embroidery since my childhood. I can open up this pouch without

damaging the seal, and I can sew it back on as good as new. Nobody will find out."

Guo Jing was delighted. Li Ping fetched her needles and carefully undid the silk thread that was holding the embroidered pouch together. She took a folded paper through the seam and spread it out to take a look. As they read the paper, mother and son looked at each other; a chill crept up their bodies.

Turned out it was Genghis Khan's secret order to Ogedei, Tuolei and Guo Jing; as soon as the Jin is defeated, they were to proceed south to Lin'an in the shortest time possible, to defeat the Song and unify it under the Great Mongolia. The secret order also said that if Guo Jing rendered a great merit, he was to be crowned the prince with all glory and honor belonging to that title; but if he harbored a different mind, Ogedei and Tuolei were to behead him immediately, and his mother must also be executed.

Guo Jing stared blankly for half a day, finally he said, "Ma, if not for your skill in opening up this pouch, I don't know if we, mother and child, could have kept our lives. I am a citizen of our Great Song, how could I sell my own country for personal gain?"

"What are we going to do?" Li Ping asked.

"Ma, I regret that you will have to suffer some hardship," Guo Jing said, "We are running away to the south, tonight."

"Absolutely," Li Ping replied, "Go and make necessary preparation; don't let anybody find out our plan."

Guo Jing nodded; quickly returned to his own tent. He only took several changes of clothing. Other than his little red horse, he took eight horses, with the thought of his mother

and he could rely on those horses to escape in case the Great Khan's army pursued them. He left all the gold and precious jewels the Great Khan gave him, along with the tiger-head hilt golden blade, in the tent. He removed his general uniform and put on regular leather clothing. He grew up in the desert, today he was going to leave for good, never to return, he could not refrain from feeling sadness in his heart. He left the tent he considered to be home with a heavy heart. He saw the sky was getting darker, so quickly he went back to his mother's tent.

Lifting the tent cover his heart skipped a beat. His mother was gone; only two bundles lying on the ground. "Ma!" he called out, but nobody answered. He felt something was terribly wrong; he was about to go out of the tent to look for his mother when suddenly the curtain was lifted up, a bright light from a torch dazzled his eyes. General Chilaun was standing outside the tent, calling out, "The Great Khan summons the Golden Blade Consort!" Chilaun was accompanied by a great number of soldiers, all wielding spears.

Seeing this situation Guo Jing was really anxious. If he relied on his martial art, Chilaun would not be able to do anything to him, but he remembered his mother, "Mother must be captured by the Great Khan, how I could escape alone?" he thought. Thus he followed Chilaun walking toward the Golden Tent.

He saw two-thousand of the Great Khan's archers were arrayed in row after row outside the tent, all wielding long sabers or halberds. Chilaun said, "The Great Khan ordered me to bind you. Please forgive me for offending the Consort." Guo Jing nodded, put his hands behind his back, then in big strides he entered the tent.

It was very bright, almost like a daytime, with dozens of butter candles burning inside the tent. Genghis Khan looked very angry, he slapped a table and shouted, "I have never treated you badly; I raised you up since you were little; I also gave my beloved daughter to be your wife. Little thief, you dare to rebel against me?"

Guo Jing saw the embroidered pouch and the letter inside it were lying on the table; he knew he would die soon. Boldly he answered, "I am the Great Song's citizen. How can I obey your order to attack my own country?"

Hearing him boldly defying his words, Genghis Khan was enraged. "Take him out and execute him!" he shouted.

Guo Jing's hands were tightly tied behind his back, while eight soldiers wielding sabers guarded him; he was unable to resist, he shouted loudly, "You made an alliance with the Great Song to defeat the Jins; halfway there you renounced your own promise, you failed to keep your word, what kind of hero is that?"

Genghis Khan was livid; his foot flew out and kicked the table upside down, shouted loudly, "After the Jin is defeated my alliance with the Song will be completed. If I attack the south, how can you say I break my promise? Quickly behead him!"

A lot of the generals were actually good to Guo Jing, but seeing their Great Khan was in fury, nobody dared to say anything. Guo Jing did not say another word. He walked out of the tent in big strides.

Suddenly from the prairie Toulei came rushing in, riding on a horseback, shouting loudly, "Hold your blade!" His upper body was naked, while only wearing a pair of leather pants on his lower body. It looked like he was asleep when the report came; hastily he came over to plead for Guo Jing. He

rushed into the Golden Tent and said, "Father King, Guo Jing Anda has rendered a great service; he had saved your life as well as mine. Although he had committed a capital crime, you can't behead him."

Recalling Guo Jing's merits Genghis Khan called out, "Bring him back!" The guards took him back into the tent.

Genghis Khan was silent for half a day; he finally said, "You are loyal to the Song; what good does it bring you? Once you told me the story of Yue Fei; he was utterly loyal, serving his country, yet in the end he was executed anyway. You help me conquering the Song Dynasty, today in front of all these people I give you my oath that I am going to make you the king of the Song, then you can unify your river and mountain [jiang shan - meaning country]."

"I have never dared to rebel against the Great Khan," Guo Jing said, "But if you want me to sell my own country in exchange of my own riches and honor, then although a thousand blades and ten thousand arrows should pierce my body, I still cannot follow your order."

"Bring his mother here!" Genghis Khan ordered. Two of his guards took Li Ping out from the back of the tent.

Guo Jing saw his mother, "Ma!" he called out trying to approach her, but the guards raised their blades to block. "This matter is only known to us, mother and son, who could have leaked our secret?" Guo Jing thought.

Genghis Khan said, "If you will obey my command, you and your mother will enjoy abundant riches and glory; if not, your mother will be executed, that means you bring your own mother's death. You will become an unfilial son."

Guo Jing was intimidated by his words, he was terror-stricken, and could only lower his head without knowing

what to do.

“Anda,” Tuolei urged, “You grew up in Mongolia, you are no different than Mongolian people. The Song Dynasty is a corrupt government, colluding with the Jins in killing your father and forcing your mother to leave home. If not for my Father King’s benevolence, where would you be today? You and I are brothers who love each other so much; I cannot let you become an unfilial person. I do hope you will reconsider your decision; receive and obey the Great Khan’s command.”

Guo Jing looked at his mother, wanting to ask her opinion; but he recalled what his mother had taught him all this time he was growing up. He also remembered the pitiable condition of the people of the western countries Mongolia had conquered; how families were broken up and killed. It was truly a difficult dilemma he was facing.

Genghis Khan’s pair of tiger eyes stared at him, waiting for him to speak. The several hundreds people inside the Golden Tent held their breath; all eyes were trained toward Guo Jing.

“I ...,” Guo Jing said, moved forward one step, but did not continue.

“Great Khan,” suddenly Li Ping opened her mouth, “I am afraid this child doesn’t understand this matter clearly; why don’t I try to give him some advice?”

Genghis Khan was delighted, he quickly agreed, “Very well, quickly advice him.”

Li Ping stepped forward, pulled Guo Jing’s arm, took him to a corner of the Golden Tent, then they sat down together. Li Ping embraced her son tight in her bosom, then gently said, “Twenty years ago at the Ox Village in Lin’an prefecture, I



was expecting a child: you. It was snowing heavily that day, when Priest Qiu Chuji met your father. He presented a gift of two daggers; one he gave to your father, the other he gave to your Uncle Yang.” While saying that, she took the dagger from Guo Jing’s waist, and pointed to the two characters carved on the dagger’s hilt, ‘Guo Jing’. She said, “Qiu Daozhang gave the name ‘Guo Jing’ to you, and ‘Yang Kang’ to Uncle Yang’s child. Do you know the story behind those names?”

“Qiu Daozhang wanted us not to forget the disgrace of Jingkang,” Guo Jing answered.

“Right,” Li Ping said, “That Yang family kid regarded an enemy for a father, and as a result his body perished and his name disgraced. But it’s useless to talk about him. I just feel bad for your Uncle Yang; he was such a great hero, his own son has tarnished his illustrious name.” Sighing heavily she continued, “I have endured suffering and shame for many years; raising you in this bitter cold desert of the north, why did I do that? Would I raise someone who would sell his own country and become a traitor; so that your father in the underworld would be grieved and disgraced?”

“Ma!” Guo Jing almost shouted; tears flowing down his cheeks.

Li Ping was speaking in Chinese, Genghis Khan, Tuolei, and the other generals did not understand what she said, but they saw Guo Jing burst into tears; they thought Li Ping was afraid of death and she had succeeded in persuading her son, they were secretly pleased.

Li Ping continued, “Man can only live for a hundred years, it will pass in a flash; what’s the big deal about living or dying? As long as you live with an upright heart and keep your honor clean; then your life won’t be in vain. If other

people treat us badly, we don't need to repay their wickedness. Child, remember what I said!" She looked at Guo Jing intently for a long time; her face looked very tender. Finally she said, "Child, you must take a good care of yourself!" While saying that she raised the dagger and cut the ropes binding Guo Jing's hands; then straightaway turned the blade and thrust it into her own chest.

Guo Jing untied his hands, and rushed to snatch the dagger away, but he was too late. The dagger was extremely sharp, it had already entered her chest up to the hilt.

Genghis Khan was shocked, "Seize him!" he shouted. The eight guards did not dare to hurt the Consort; they threw their blades to the ground and pounced on Guo Jing.

Guo Jing's heart was full of sorrow; while holding his mother tight, he swept his leg and two guards were sent flying and tumbling down to the ground. His left elbow shot backwards, and with a 'crack' sound hit a guard on the chest, breaking his ribs.

Several generals shouted and stepped forward. Guo Jing dashed toward the back of the tent. His left hand pulled the rope that held the tent taut, and half of the golden tent collapsed, falling on top of the officers' heads.

Amidst the confusion he leaped up and out of the tent, still holding his mother tight. But the horn was sounded, officers and soldiers mounted their horses and pursued after him. Guo Jing was weeping and calling his mother, "Ma!" yet his mother did not answer; he felt for her breathing, but his mother had already died. Holding his mother's corpse he tried to take advantage of the dark and break through the camp, but everywhere he heard people shouting and horses neighing; then torches were lighted up, illuminating the camp like millions of stars illuminating the dark night.

He was nervous not knowing which way he should go; everywhere he looked he saw Mongolian officers and soldiers. Even if he were supernaturally brave, but he was only one man; how could he face tens of thousands Mongolian army by himself? If he were riding on his little red horse, then he could outrun all these people, but he was on foot carrying his mother. It was a million times more difficult to escape from danger.

He stopped crying and without saying another word ran forward as fast as he could. He thought that as long as he could reach the cliff, he could use his lightness kungfu to climb the cliff. Although Mongolian soldiers were many, nobody could crawl up the cliff. Hence he might evade their chase momentarily and thought about ways to escape.

While rushing forward suddenly he heard shouts coming from the front, a cavalry was coming, under the torch light he saw they were led by a red-face, white-bearded general; it was one of the four warriors, senior general Chilaun. Guo Jing leaned sideways to evade Chilaun's hacking saber. Instead of turning back to run away, he charged into the cavalry. The Mongolian soldiers were startled and shouted even louder.

Guo Jing stretched out his left hand, grabbing a 'shi zhang fu' [leader of a ten men unit] right leg; at the same time his right foot kicked the ground and he flew upwards. He landed on the horseback, put down his mother's corpse on the horseback. Without too much trouble he threw the 'shi zhang fu' to the ground while simultaneously snatched his spear.

The jump to the horseback, putting down his mother, throwing the 'shi zhang fu' down, and snatching his spear; four actions were executed in one swift and fluid motion. On the horseback he became like a tiger grew a pair of wings;

his legs squeezed the horse, and sweeping his spear he charged through the cavalry. Chilaun shouted his order and his troops turned back to pursue Guo Jing.

He managed to escape from the enemy, but the direction his horse was running was actually opposite to the direction to the cliff; the more the horse ran, the farther they became. Should he run directly to the south, or should he try to reach the cliff?

While he was still contemplating which way to go, another senior general, Bourchu had arrived with his troops. This time Genghis Khan had flown into a rage; he passed an order to capture Guo Jing at all cost. Group by group the cavalries were dispatched; thousand of riders ran quickly to the south, trying to block all passages leading to the south. Guo Jing outran the group led by Bourchu; his clothes and his horse were full of blood.

It was a good thing that the Great Khan ordered them to capture Guo Jing alive; otherwise the Mongolian soldiers would assault him with arrows. With arrows coming from all three directions, even if Guo Jing were supernaturally brave, how could he escape this tight siege?

Guo Jing felt his mother's body in his hand turned colder and colder; he struggled hard to hold his tears, urging his horse to keep running south. He had left the pursuers far behind, but the day was getting brighter, soon it would be dawn; while he was still in the center of Mongolian territory; ten thousands 'li's away from the Central Plains. With only a horse and a spear, how could he escape to his hometown?

Riding for a while, he saw the dust was rising from the ground ahead of him; a group of cavalry was coming his way. Guo Jing held the rein and turned to the east. But his

horse had been running for half a night, continuously supporting Guo Jing and his mother's body; suddenly its front legs gave up, it fell kneeling on the ground, unable to stand any longer. It was a very critical situation, yet Guo Jing still did not want to be separated from his mother's corpse. With his left arm holding her and his right arm wielding the spear, he charged into the incoming cavalry.

He saw the cavalry was getting very close; suddenly amidst the rising dust came a swishing noise, an arrow flew in and hit his spear. The arrow was very strong, Guo Jing's hand was shaken and the spearhead was broken. While he was still in shock, another arrow flew toward his chest. Guo Jing tossed the broken spear sideways and held out his hand in front of his body to catch the arrow. To his surprise, the arrowhead was already broken. He lifted his head only to see a general holding his rein and stopped in front of Guo Jing. It was the man who taught him archery; the Divine Archer Jebbeh.

"Shifu!" Guo Jing called out, "Are you going to take me back?"

"Absolutely," Jebbeh said.

Guo Jing thought, "In any way it will be difficult for me to escape this tight siege today. Rather than let others capture me, why don't I let Shifu have this merit?" Therefore, he said, "Very well, just let me bury my mother first."

Looking at four directions he saw toward his left a small mound. He carried his mother's body to that mound; dug the earth with his broken spear and lowered his mother gently into the hole. He saw the dagger in her chest, but he could not bear to take it out. He knelt on the ground and kowtowed several times before finally pouring the sandy soil on top of her body. He remembered his mother's bitter

suffering in raising him since he was a baby until he became an adult; and in the end he had to bury her just like this. He was overwhelmed with grief that he was unable to cry anymore.

Jebah dismounted his horse and kowtowed four times in front of Li Ping's grave. He stood up, then took his quiver, his bow, and his spear; and gave everything to Guo Jing. He also led his horse by the reins, and placed the reins in Guo Jing's hand, he said, "Go. I am afraid we are not going to see each other anymore."

Guo Jing was taken aback, "Shifu!" he called out.

"You dared to risk your life for me in the past; am I not a real man that I don't dare to risk my life for you?" Jebah said.

"Shifu, you are defying the Great Khan's order," Guo Jing said, "You will be in great danger."

"I have followed him attacking to the east and going to war in the west, my contribution is not small," Jebah said, "At most the Great Khan will beat me to half dead, he won't behead me. Just go, quick!"

Guo Jing was still hesitating; Jebah continued, "I am afraid my own troops would not want to listen to me, so I took the troops you led in the expedition to the west. Go ahead and asked them, whether they are greedy of riches and honor to turn you in?"

Leading his horse Guo Jing stepped forward; the cavalry dismounted their horses at once, and then knelt down on the ground, shouted, "Xiao Ren respectfully send General home to the south." Guo Jing raised his eyes to see, and they were indeed the officers and soldiers who faced death with him in the west. Guo Jing's heart was so moved. He

said, "I have offended the Great Khan, deserving a capital punishment. You let me go; if the Great Khan finds out, all of you will be in big trouble."

The soldiers replied, "General has treated us with benevolence as high as the mountain; we won't forget that."

Guo Jing sighed. He raised his hands to say goodbye to the troops, then with the spear in his hand he leaped to the horseback. He was about to move when suddenly the dust rose ahead of him, another group of cavalry came approaching.

Jebbeh, Guo Jing, and the troops' expression changed. Jebbeh thought, "I have deliberately defied Khan's order by letting Guo Jing go; but if I fight these troops, that would be a blatant rebellion." Yet he did not change his mind, "Guo Jing, go!" he shouted. However, from the incoming army came a loud shout, "Don't hurt the Consort!" Everybody was stunned. They saw the rushing army bore the Fourth Prince's banner.

Amidst the rising cloud of dust Tuolei appeared and arrived in a flash; turned out he was riding Guo Jing's swift little red horse. He held his rein and jumped down from the horseback, anxiously asked, "Anda, are you all right?"

"I am fine," Guo Jing replied, "Master Jebbeh is going to take me back to see the Great Khan." He was deliberately protecting Jebbeh; so that the Great Khan would not find out the real story.

Toulei cast a sidelong glance toward Jebbeh, he said, "Anda, take this little red horse and leave quickly." He also put a bundle on the saddle and continued, "Here is a thousand 'liang' of gold; we brothers will see each other again some other time."

They were both great warriors; in time like this there was no need to say another word. Guo Jing stood up and mounted his little red horse. "Tell Huazheng Meizi [little sister – term of endearment] to take a good care of herself. Tell her to marry another man, just forget about me."

Tuolei heaved a long sigh, "Huazheng Meizi will never agree to marry another. I think she is going to look for you in the south. At that time I will send somebody to escort her."

"No, don't come looking for me," Guo Jing hastily said, "Not to mention the world is big, but even if she can find me, that will only add to our agony."

Tuolei was silent; they looked at each other without saying anything. After half a day finally Tuolei said, "Just go, I will see you off for a while."

Two people rode fast to the south; very soon they have covered more than thirty 'li's. "Anda," Guo Jing said, "'Even if one sees someone off a thousand 'li's, in the end they must part', you can go back now!"

"Let me see you off some more time," Tuolei answered.

About ten more 'li's later, both men dismounted their horses and said their goodbyes; tears rolling down their cheeks.

Tuolei gazed at Guo Jing's back, which became smaller and smaller; it looked like a dark shadow on the vastness of the desert, finally disappeared on the southern horizon. He stood motionless for a long time, then sadly mounted his horse and headed back north.

**End of Chapter 38.**





## Chapter 39 - Discerning Good From Evil

Translated by Frans Soetomo



*It was actually Mount Hua's most dangerous place, called the 'to give one's life cliff' [she shen*

*ya]; whoever jumped from this place would certainly meet a cruel death. Huang Rong dashed forward to grab Guo Jing's clothes. Her hand pulled hard as she jumped over his shoulder and a moment later she was the one standing at the edge of the cliff.*

Guo Jing rode his horse for several days, leaving the dangerous area, slowly heading south. The day was getting warmer, the grass looked longer; along the way he saw the remnants of war: broken walls and ruined homes, human bones scattered here and there. The sights, the smell ... Everything brought a dreadful and nauseating feeling in his heart.

One day he stopped to take a rest in a pavilion by the roadside. He saw these inscriptions on the pavilion's wall, "A poem from a Tang Dynasty man: 'Water trickles downward day by day, ultimately overpowering the cry of chicken and dogs. Thousand villages fell to become food to the wild animals. The people vanished in smoke to give way to the flowers.' My Central Plains' beautiful river and mountain unexpectedly fallen victim to violent battles. People turned into ashes as if the above poem was written for today's situation."

Looking at these lines of characters Guo Jing was entranced, sadness came creeping into his heart and he could not refrain from shedding some tears.

He had roamed this vast and boundless world, but actually did not know where he should go. Within just one short year his mother, Huang Rong, his five masters, the people that were dear to him had all died. Ouyang Feng had killed his masters and Huang Rong; he was going to find him and

seek revenge. But as soon as he thought about the words 'seek revenge', the tragic massacre of the people of Khoresm came into his mind. In order for him to avenge his father's death he had to kill so many innocent civilians, how could he have peace in his heart? It looked like this 'seeking revenge' matter was not necessarily a right thing to do.

Thinking about all other things, he came into this thought, "All my life I painstakingly trained myself in martial arts that finally I reached my current level, and then what? I can't even protect my own mother and Rong'er, then what use is my martial art skill? I wanted with all my heart to be a good person, but in the end who would be happy because of me? Mother, Rong'er, both died because of me. Huazheng Meizi has to suffer forever because of me. Truly the number of people who suffered miserably because of me is not a few."

"Wanyan Honglie and Muhammad were bad people. But what about Genghis Khan? He killed Wanyan Honglie; so I should say he is a good person. But then he ordered me to attack the Great Song. He took care of my mother and me for twenty years, but in the end he had caused my mother's death."

"Yang Kang and I became sworn brothers, but our hearts were a world apart from the start. Sister Mu Nianci is a good person, but why did her heart set on loving only Yang Kang? Tuolei Anda and I love each other, but when he leads the army attacking south and we meet each other on the battlefield, should he and I kill each other? No, no. Everybody has a mother, a mother who carries him for ten months, who painstakingly nurture and raise him up; how could I kill somebody's son and cause his mother to weep bitterly? He doesn't have a heart to kill me; I don't have a heart to kill him. However, shall I ignore the fact that he kills my Great Song's innocent people?"

“Training martial art is for beating and killing people, it looks like I spent twenty years of my life incorrectly; I studied and learned diligently, painstakingly; in the end all I can do is bringing harm to other people. If I knew it from the start, I wouldn’t train to have a better skill in martial art. But if I don’t learn martial art, then what should I do? I live in this world, in the end, what is my purpose of life? Decades from now, what will happen to me? Is it better to live longer, or to die sooner? Right now I have already had endless anxiety, if I live longer, won’t I have more anxiety? But if I die sooner, why would my mother give birth to me? Why would she endure hardship and suffering to raise me up?” Tossing and turning with these thought, the more he thought, the more confused he became.

For several days he could not eat during the day, and could not sleep during the night; he went back and forth in the wilderness pondering all these things.

“Mother and my benevolent masters all taught me to uphold justice and keep my words. Therefore, although I loved Rong’er dearly I could not ask the Great Khan to cancel our betrothal. But in the end, not only I drove mother and Rong’er to their injustice death, but did I make the Great Khan, Tuolei, and Huazheng happy? The Seven Heroes of Jiangnan, my seven masters, and benevolent master Hong, are all heroic people of honor, yet none of them ended up enjoying the fruit of their good deeds. Ouyang Feng and Qiu Qianren do not uphold justice and righteousness, yet they live free and unrestrained. Is there any justice in this world? Can ‘lao tian ye’ [the Heaven, God] really see?”

One day he arrived at a small town in Jinan prefecture, Shandong province. He stopped by a restaurant to drink some wine. He had just drunk three cups when suddenly a man rushed in, pointed his finger to Guo Jing and cursed

him, "Barbarian thief, you have destroyed my home and killed my family; I must kill you!" While saying that his fist flew toward Guo Jing's face.

Guo Jing was startled, he turned his left hand around and caught his hand, gently twisted it; and the man fell tumbling down. Apparently that man did not know martial art at all. Guo Jing did not have any intention to harm him; he felt really bad that he had caused that man to fall down and bleed from his head. Hastily he held out his hand to raise that man up, saying, "Brother, you must have mistaken me for others!"

That man was bawling and kept cursing him, "Barbarian thief!" Dozens more men came from outside and start kicking and hitting Guo Jing for no reason at all. After pondering about the dire consequences of using martial art, Guo Jing had made a decision not to harm others using his martial art skill. Besides, these people were neither known to him nor did they know any martial arts; they were attacking him randomly. Hence he only evaded to the east and dodged to the west, but did not fight back at all. However, there were more and more people coming in from outside; the restaurant was small, so against his will Guo Jing had to taste some fists and kicks nonetheless.

He was about to use his strength to shove his way out of the restaurant when suddenly somebody loudly called from outside, "Jing'er! What are you doing here?"

Guo Jing raised his head up and saw the person calling was wearing a Taoist robe, with a long white beard; it was none other than the Changchun Zi [Eternal Spring] Qiu Chuji. Guo Jing was delighted, "Qiu Daozhang [Taoist Priest Qiu]," he called, "These people are hitting me for no reason at all."

Qiu Chuji pushed his arms out and opened up a way for Guo Jing to escape; he pulled Guo Jing out of the restaurant. The people rushed out to attack them, but Qiu and Guo, two people faced them while moving backward step by step. Once outside Guo Jing whistled to call his red horse and not too long afterwards two people riding on one horse sped out of the town and disappeared into the wilderness.

Guo Jing again told about how those town people without any reason pounced on him and beat him. Qiu Chuji smiled, "You are dressed as a Mongolian; they thought you are a Barbarian Mongolian." Then he proceeded by telling Guo Jing how the Mongolians and the Jins had violent battles in the Shandong province. The local people had been under the Jin's oppression for a long time, they raised arm to help the Mongolians. Who would have thought that the Mongolian's officers and soldiers were as oppressive and tyrannical as the Jins were; they destroyed, they killed, they took captive and they plundered; they made the lives of the common people miserable beyond description. When a Mongolian army was passing through, the people did not dare to do anything, but if there was a lone Mongolian officer or soldier left behind, usually he would be killed by the people.

"Why did you let them beat you?" Qiu Chuji asked, "Just look at you, bruised and swollen all over."

Guo Jing heaved a deep sigh and then told him how Genghis Khan had issued a secret order to him to attack the south, and how his mother had died because of it. He told Priest Qiu everything.

Qiu Chuji was shocked, "If Genghis Khan is going to attack our Great Song, then we must go south immediately to inform the government to guard against this invasion," he said.

Guo Jing shook his head, "What good will that bring? The result would be corpses of officers and soldiers from both sides piling up as high as a mountain; innocent people's families being broken and killed."

"But if the Song perishes under the Mongolia, the common people will suffer even more," Qiu Chuji said, "An endless hardship!"

"Qiu Daozhang," Guo Jing said, "There are so many things I am not able to think through; I want to ask you to give me directions."

Qiu Chuji pulled his hand, led him to a big locust tree and took him sitting underneath it. "Speak to me!" he said.

Guo Jing immediately poured out what had been troubling his heart these past few days; how he felt that his skill in martial art only brought harm to other people. Finally he sighed and said, "Therefore, disciple has decided not to fight with anybody for the rest of my life. I wish I could forget everything I know about martial arts, only an old habit will always come back. I was careless today, and made someone bleed from his head."

Qiu Chuji shook his head, "Jing'er, your thinking is incorrect," he said, "Dozens of years ago, the Wulin world secret manual, the Nine Yin Manual, appeared for the first time. I don't know how many warriors of the Jianghu had died from fighting over this book. Afterwards at the Sword Meet of Huashan [Mount Hua] my master Chongyang Zhenren [Sage, lit. true/real man, a respectful term to address a Taoist priest] had defeated everybody and took possession of the manual. Initially he intended to destroy the book, but later on he said, 'Water can carry the boat, but can also capsize it; be it fortune or calamity, in the end it depends on the person who uses it.' In the end he decided



to preserve the manual. Every talent in the world, whether it is 'wen' [literature] or 'wu' [martial art]; a strong army or a sophisticated device, not a single one of them does not benefit mankind; but the opposite is also true, every single one of them has the potential to bring calamity to the world. As long as you have a good heart, the stronger your martial art, the better it is for you. Why would you want to forget it?"

Guo Jing hesitated for a moment before saying, "What Daozhang said was not wrong, but among the current Jianghu heroes; the Eastern Heretic, the Western Poison, the Southern Emperor and the Northern Beggar have the strongest martial arts. Disciple has been thinking carefully; to reach the martial art level of these four experts one must undergoes difficulties, to the point of almost impossible, hardship and suffering. Yet even if one is able to endure all that, what good would that be for people other than oneself?"

Qiu Chuji was silent for a moment before answering, "Huang Yaoshi is an eccentric man; although outwardly he shows anger to the world and detests mundane affair, but in his heart there is an unspeakable bitterness. He acts as he pleases, he does not have any consideration toward other people. I won't take him as an example. Ouyang Feng does all kinds of evil; we don't need to talk about him. Emperor Duan is compassionate and benevolent; if he stayed on the throne he would be able to benefit the common people. It's a pity that because of personal resentment over a tiny, tiny affair he withdrew from society and lives in seclusion; he can't be regarded as great man with great courage. Only Hong Qigong, Hong Bangzhu [Clan Leader Hong] is left who is a great hero to uphold justice; always helping those in distress. He has my full admiration. The second Sword Meet of Mount Hua is right around the corner; I think there

might be someone who can exceed Hong Bangzhu in term of martial art. But I believe the people will elect him as the Number One in the Wulin World."

Hearing the four characters 'Sword Meet of Mount Hua', Guo Jing's heart shivered. "Is my benevolent master completely healed from his injury? Do you think the Senior is going to attend the meeting at Mount Hua?" he asked.

"After returning from the west, I have never seen Hong Bangzhu," Qiu Chuji said, "But whether he will take part in the Sword Meet or not, I think he will go to Mount Hua. Actually, I am passing through this place on my way over there; why don't you come with me to take a look?"

These past several days Guo Jing was very downhearted; he lost interest in, and loathed all kinds of, fighting. He shook his head and said, "Disciple is not coming, please forgive me."

"Where are you going?" Qiu Chuji asked.

Guo Jing awkwardly said, "Disciple does not know; I'll go wherever my feet lead me!"

Qiu Chuji could see that his face had lost its color, he looked so ghastly; like someone who was just recovered from a severe illness. Qiu Chuji was very concerned, but no matter how he persuaded, Guo Jing simply shook his head and did not say anything. Qiu Chuji thought, "He would normally listen to Hong Bangzhu; if he goes to Mount Hua, then master and disciple will see each other, his spirit might be aroused and be back to his old kind self. But how can I convince him to go?" All of a sudden a thought came into his mind, "Jing'er," he said, "If you really want to forget the martial art you have already learned, I think I might have a way."

“Really?” Guo Jing said.

“I know someone who had accidentally learned the Nine Yin Manual’s excellent martial arts,” Qiu Chuji said, “But later on he realized that he had broken his own promise, he had betrayed something entrusted to him; in the end he strived to forget the skills he had learned. If you really want to follow his example, you must talk to him.”

Guo Jing jumped up immediately. “Right!” he exclaimed, “It’s Zhou Botong, Zhou Dage [big brother Zhou]!” But suddenly he remembered that Zhou Botong was Qiu Chuji’s martial uncle, while he casually called him big brother; he felt he was usurping Qiu Chuji’s seniority by one generation. He could not restrain from feeling really awkward.

Qiu Chuji simply smiled slightly, he said, “Zhou Shishu [Martial Uncle Zhou] has never had any regard of anybody’s seniority; you can call him whatever you like, I don’t mind a bit.”

“Where is he?” Guo Jing asked.

“I am sure Zhou Shishu will not miss the meeting at Mount Hua,” Qiu Chuji replied.

“Very well,” Guo Jing said, “In that case I will come with Daozhang to Mount Hua.”

Two men traveled together to the nearest town ahead then Guo Jing took out some silvers and bought a steed for Qiu Chuji to ride. They went riding to the west, and in less than one day arrived at the foot of Mount Hua.

This Mount Hua was one of the five mountains called the Western Mountains; people of the ancient time equate these five mountains with five scriptures. They said Mount

Hua was like 'chun qiu' [spring and autumn period - 770-476 BC], possessed the same lethality as the Wei kingdom. Among the mountains in the world, the ruggedness of Mount Hua was matchless.

Two men arrived at the 'shan sun ting' [mountain grass pavilion] at the southern entrance of Mount Hua. Next to this pavilion they saw twelve big dragon rattans, so called because their trunks and branches intertwined each other resembled flying dragons.

Looking at these ancient twelve rattans with their branches rising up to the sky, suddenly the 'fei long zai tian' [dragon flies to the sky] came into Guo Jing's mind. Following the Nine Yin Manual principles, these twelve rattans formed different stances of the dragon postures, creating twelve grand stances where the move might be executed. From being lost in thought, suddenly he woke up with a start, "I was hoping I could forget the martial art I already learned, how I could think about creating a new move to defeat and to kill others? I have fallen too deep, truly I am incorrigible."

Suddenly Qiu Chuji voice was heard, "Mount Hua is our Taoist holy mountain; these twelve dragon rattans were supposedly planted by 'chen tuan lao zu', [ancestor Chen Tuan].

"Chen tuan lao zu?" Guo Jing asked, "Was he the deity who slept for many years without waking up?"

"Chen tuan lao zu was born toward the latter part of the Tang Dynasty," Qiu Chuji explained, "During the Five Dynasties period: Liang, Tang, Jin, Han, Zhou, every time he heard the kingdom changed ruler, he was always worried and not happy; so he closed his door and refused to come out. Hence the people said he was sleeping for many years.

Actually he was just troubled by the world's anxiety, that the common people always suffered hardships; that's why he was not willing to go out. Finally he heard 'Song Dai Zu' [the great ancestor of Song Dynasty] rose up to the throne; he laughed heartily and in his happiness he fell from the donkey's back, saying that the world henceforth would be peaceful. Song Dai Zu was kind and had a deep affection toward the common people; his contribution was truly not a few."

"If Chen tuan lao zu were born today, he would unavoidably close his door and sleep for exhausting years and tiring months," Guo Jing commented.

Qiu Chuji heaved a deep sigh and said, "Mongolians rule in the north, deliberately will invade the south. It's a pity the Song Dynasty's princes and ministers are muddle-headed idiots; they have eyes but cannot see the problem we are facing. But we are real men, although we realize we are helpless, still we need to fight. Even though Chen tuan lao zu was an honorable person, he hid himself whenever the world was in trouble; that was a bad example of chivalry."

Guo Jing silently agreed.

Two men had to leave their steeds at the foot of the mountain. They continued on foot; slowly climbing through the 'tao hua ping' [peach blossom plain], crossing the 'xi yi xia' [lit. rare barbarian box, I don't know what it is], climbing 'sha meng ping' [grassy dream plain]. The further they went, the more dangerous the terrain became. After reaching 'xi xuan men' [western mysterious gate] they had to ascend holding on to an iron chain. Utilizing their lightness kungfu, two men climbed up rapidly. After about seven 'li's, they reached the 'qing ping' [green plain]. Beyond this plain they saw a row of rocks that looked like

they were truncated. Toward the north of this wall there was a big rock blocking the pathway.

“This rock is called ‘hui xin shi’ [lit. turn-around heart stone],” Qiu Chuji said, “Beyond this stone the pathway is getting more rugged and dangerous than ever. Casual travelers are advised to turn back here.”

In the distant they saw a small stone pavilion. “That is the ‘du qi ting’ [gambling chess pavilion],” Qiu Chuji explained, “Legend has it that the Song Emperor, Song Dai Zu made a bet playing chess with Mister Xi Yi [the same ‘xi yi’ as in the paragraph above]. The Mount Hua was the stake. The Emperor lost, and ever since the Mount Hua territory is exempt from paying tribute.”

Guo Jing said, “Genghis Khan, the Khoresm King, the Great Jin Emperor, the Great Song Emperor; seemed like they are all gambling with this world as the stake.”

Qiu Chuji nodded. “Absolutely,” he said, “Jing’er, looks to me like you have done a lot of thinking lately. I can see the difference; you are no longer your muddle-headed-dumb-kid previous self.” Then he continued, “These emperors and generals view the world as their gambling stake; if they lose, not only they will lose the ‘jiang shan’ [lit. river and mountain – country/homeland], they will also lose their lives, as well as making the world a living hell for common people.”

Crossing the ‘qian chi xia’ [thousand-foot gorge], the ‘bai chi xia’ [hundred-foot gorge], they had to walk sideways. Guo Jing thought, “It will be very difficult to ward off if suddenly an enemy attack in this place.” He was just having this thought when suddenly someone shouted from ahead of them, “Qiu Chuji, we spared your life at the Misty Rain

Tavern [yan yu lou]; what are you doing climbing Mount Hua?"

Qiu Chuji hastily rushed ahead several steps until he reached a small cavity on the side of the cliff before he raised his head to see Sha Tongtian, Peng Lianhu, Lingzhi Shangren [lit. upper/above man, a respectful term to address Buddhist monk], and Hou Tonghai, four people standing at the end of the pathway.

When he climbed the mountain, Qiu Chuji had expected at some point to see Ouyang Feng, Qiu Qianren and other archenemies; he thought Zhou Botong, Hong Qigong, Guo Jing and the others would meet their match. But he had never expected that Sha Tongtian and the others had the guts to climb this mountain. Although he was standing on an open space, the terrain was extremely dangerous. If he was crowded by the enemy, chances are he would fall into the tens of thousands 'zhang's deep canyon below.

In this critical time he did not have time to think, with a 'shua' sound he pulled his sword and with 'bai hong jing tian' [bright rainbow across the sky] he ferociously attacked Hou Tonghai. Among these four enemies, Hou Tonghai was the weakest, but he was also the closest; Qiu Chuji's sword stance was precisely aimed to the weakest point of the enemy.

Hou Tonghai saw the sword was swift and fierce, he had no alternative, he leaned sideways to evade and lifted up his three-prong fork to block the sword. Peng Lianhu's judge pen and Lingzhi Shangren's copper cymbals made a converging attack with the intention of forcing Qiu Chuji to fall into the ravine below.

As Qiu Chuji's sword made contact with Hou Tonghai's three-prong fork, he transferred his energy to the tip of the

sword and borrowing the strength, his body soared above Hou Tonghai's head. Sparks flew everywhere as Peng Lianhu and Lingzhi Shangren's weapon hit a rock.

Sha Tongtian had lost an arm at the Temple of the Iron Spear; by this time his wound was completely healed. Seeing his 'shi di' [younger martial brother] fail to block the enemy, he executed the 'yi xing huan wei' [altering shape changing position] technique right in front of Qiu Chuji to prevent him from running away. Qiu Chuji's sword moved swiftly; Sha Tongtian only saw bright lights flashing around him, aiming his vital points. Sha Tongtian was dazzled and unable to fend off the sword; he was forced to move back several steps, giving Qiu Chuji an opportunity to dash forward.

Sha and Peng shouted loudly and pursued him. Qiu Chuji turned his sword around and launched several stances. At that moment Lingzhi Shangren arrived sweeping his cymbals. Three different types of weapons clashed.

Seeing Qiu Chuji's precarious condition Guo Jing should have gone forward and help, but he felt that people who resort to violence were very bad. He loathed watching both sides fought violently; turning his head, unwilling to watch, he continued his journey, holding on to a rattan branch. Unexpectedly the path was sloping down.

While strolling leisurely two thoughts were waging war inside his mind, "Shall I help Qiu Daozhang? Or shall I stick to my commitment of not fighting anybody anymore?" The more he thought, the more confused he became. He considered, "If Qiu Daozhang is killed by Peng Lianhu and the others, how can I not blame myself? But if I did help and struck Peng Lianhu and the others that they fell into the ravine below, do they really deserve to die?"



He walked farther and farther away until he could not hear the clashing sound of the weapons anymore. He sat leaning on a rock, deep in thought. After a long time suddenly he heard a noise from behind the pine tree next to him, and a man appeared. Guo Jing turned around to see that man had white hair, but ruddy face; turned out it was 'shen xian lao guai' [ginseng immortal old freak] Liang Ziweng. But Guo Jing ignored him; he still sat quietly lost in thought.

Liang Ziweng was startled, he knew Guo Jing's martial art had advanced greatly; early on he was not Guo Jing match anymore. Immediately he shrunk back behind the tree. A moment later he saw Guo Jing did not pursue, he also saw that Guo Jing looked to be absentminded, his eyebrows creased on a distressed face; he was mumbling indistinctly, like he was possessed by some kind of evil spirit. Liang Ziweng thought, "Today this kid looks so weird. Let me try provoking him." He did not dare to approach; he picked up a pebble and threw it toward Guo Jing's back.

Guo Jing heard the wind, but he simply leaned sideways to evade, and still did not pay any attention to Liang Ziweng. Liang Ziweng became bolder; he came out from behind the tree, came several steps closer, and called out in a soft voice, "Guo Jing, what are you doing here?"

"I am thinking," Guo Jing replied, "If I use martial art to fight someone, do I have a good reason for it?"

Liang Ziweng was stupefied and delighted at the same time, he thought, "This dumb kid has become crazier." He approached several steps closer and said, "Hurting people is a very bad thing, of course you don't have any reason to do it."

"You think so?" Guo Jing said, "I really hope I can forget all the martial arts I've learned."

Liang Ziwen saw Guo Jing's eyes were gazing into the horizon with a blank look on his face; slowly he came from behind Guo Jing's back. "I am also in the process of forgetting my own martial art, how about I lend you a helping hand to forget yours?" he softly asked.

"Fine," Guo Jing said, "What should I do?"

"Hmm, I have an idea," Liang Ziwen said. Both of his hands made a sudden movement and expertly grabbed two major acupoints: 'tian zhu' [sky pillar] on Guo Jing's neck and 'shen tang' [divine hall] on his back.

Guo Jing was shocked, he felt his whole body went numb and he could not move. With a wicked grin on his face Liang Ziwen said, "Let me suck the blood out of your body, then you will forget using your martial art ever again." Opening his mouth wide he bit into Guo Jing's throat and sucked with all his might. He remembered how this dumb kid had sucked the valuable blood of the viper he laboriously raised so this dumb kid's martial art had improved tremendously while his own did not make any progress; by sucking Guo Jing's blood he hoped he would gain some benefit while venting off his anger at the same time. Actually, it had been a long time since Guo Jing drank the viper's blood, that the effectiveness of the blood had long gone; but in his deep resentment he ignored that fact completely.

This sudden turn of event shocked Guo Jing; he felt a severe pain on his neck that he was seeing stars in his eyes. Hastily he tried to struggle free, but his two major acupoints were sealed by enemy, his whole body unexpectedly did not have the least bit of strength. He saw Liang Ziwen's pair of eyes was red, his face looked so scary; Guo Jing felt his bite was getting harder and harder. It felt like his throat was about to be cut, then his life would leave him for sure.

In desperation he did not have time to think whether it was appropriate to use martial art to resist the enemy or not; immediately he used the 'yi jin duan gu pian' [changing muscle forging bone] to send out internal energy from his 'dan tian' toward the 'tian zhu' and 'shen tang' acupoints.

Both of Liang Ziwen's hands were holding Guo Jing extremely tight when suddenly he felt a surge of energy bursting out from within his victim's body through the two major acupoints, his hands shook and they could not help but slip. Guo Jing lowered his head and shrank his shoulder, and then using his waist's strength he struggled up. As a result Liang Ziwen's body was lifted up and flung away. With a hair-raising shriek he fell into the tens of thousands 'zhang's deep canyon below.

His scream reverberated on the canyon walls, creating a series of terrifying echoes seemingly coming from everywhere. Guo Jing was horrified; the hair behind his back rose up involuntarily. He was in a daze for half a day before he gradually calmed down. Absent-mindedly he caressed his injured neck and only then he remembered that he had accidentally killed a man using his martial art. But he thought, "If I did not kill him, he would kill me. If I don't have any reason to kill him, did he have any reason to kill me?" He stretched his neck trying to see into the valley below, but the canyon was so deep that he could not even see the bottom; did not know where Shen Xian Lao Guai's body could be.

Guo Jing sat on a rock. Tearing a piece of cloth from his robe he wrapped the wound on his neck. Suddenly he was startled by a 'bonk, bonk, bonk' noise; it sounded like a monster was coming out from behind the cliff. He was frightened; he turned his gaze to look, turned out it was a human. But this man stood with his head on the bottom and his feet on the top; with a stone in each hand. He used

those hands in place of his feet, and those 'bonk, bonk, bonk' noise was actually the sound of the stones knocking the mountain's stony pathway. Guo Jing was stunned; he squatted down to take a good look at that man's face, and he was even more surprised. That weird man was actually the Western Poison, Ouyang Feng.

Guo Jing had just received a surprise attack; seeing Ouyang Feng in this weird position he believed he was up to no good. Guo Jing retreated two steps, fully alert to guard against any potential attack. But Ouyang Feng only bent his arms and jumped on top of a big rock; standing upside down using his head as his feet, his arms stretched wide, resembled a stiff corpse.

Guo Jing's curiosity was piqued, "Mr. Ouyang, what are you doing?" he called out.

Ouyang Feng did not answer; seemed like his mind was someplace else and he did not even hear his question.

Guo Jing withdrew several more steps to make more distance between them. He raised his left hand in front of his chest to guard against Ouyang Feng's sudden attack; only then did he pay close attention of what Ouyang Feng was doing.

For about the time needed to drink a cup of tea Ouyang Feng stood upside down motionless. Guo Jing was more curious than ever; he wanted to see more clearly, so he stooped down and looked through his legs to see Ouyang Feng's face was sweating profusely; he looked in pain, like he was cultivating some strange internal energy. A moment later he stretched his arm horizontally, his body started spinning like a big top, turning faster and faster until his clothes created a strong gust of wind.

“He really is practicing martial art,” Guo Jing thought, “But this kind of martial art that requires upside down position is so strange.” Further he thought that a person who practice internal energy cultivation was usually vulnerable, probably because while circulating the energy within, the body itself devoid of any defense against outside circumstances. That was the reason usually somebody, be it his master or a friend with high level of martial art skill, would stay alongside to protect that person. Moreover, they would usually find a secluded place to avoid mishap. But strangely Ouyang Feng was practicing alone without anybody to accompany him; seemingly oblivious to outside interference. It was almost time for the second Sword Meet of Mount Hua; there would be many martial art experts in attendance, with more enemies than friends to Ouyang Feng; how could he be so bold as to practice martial art alone in this place? At this time, not to mention an expert in martial art, if even an ordinary person without any martial art skill would hit or kick him, he would certainly suffer a severe internal injury.

In Guo Jing’s eyes Ouyang Feng was like a sacrificial animal on the table, ready to be butchered. If Guo Jing did not seek revenge now, what was he waiting for? Only he had just killed Liang Ziweng; he had this heavy guilty feeling in his heart. He only moved forward a couple of steps then stood still, unable to kill Ouyang Feng.

Ouyang Feng practiced for about the time needed to boil tea; he gradually slowed down until his body stopped spinning. Finally he stretched his arms and grabbed the rocks, then ‘bonk, bonk, bonk’ he went back to where he was coming from.

Guo Jing’s curiosity was really piqued, he wanted to know where Ouyang Feng was heading, and what kind of

marvelous martial art he practiced by standing upside down; therefore, quietly Guo Jing followed after him.

Ouyang Feng walked using his hands, surprisingly it was not any slower than walking with his feet. He climbed to a hill peak, going higher and higher. Guo Jing followed not too far behind until they arrived at the jade-green lush, beautiful peak. He saw Ouyang Feng was heading straight into a cave and stopped in front it. Guo Jing hid himself behind a big rock; suddenly he heard Ouyang Feng sternly said, “Ha hu wen ying, xing er ji jin, si gu er. Your explanation is not right; I could not practice appropriately.”

Guo Jing was startled, at first he thought that those three lines were the Sanskrit lines from the Nine Yin Manual; but it sounded a little bit different. And then he immediately remembered that those were the lines he deliberately altered per his benevolent master Hong’s instruction on the boat. But why did Ouyang Feng suddenly recite those lines? Whom did he speak to?

He heard a crisp and clear female voice came out from the cave, “Your martial art is not adequate, of course you can’t practice appropriately. How could I explain incorrectly?” Guo Jing was so surprised that he almost cried out; it was the voice Huang Rong for whom he day and night mourned with grief. Didn’t she get killed in the desert? Was he dreaming? Was he in heaven? Or perhaps because of his deep affection he thought it was Huang Rong’s voice?

“I have practiced according to what you said, no mistake about it, but why did my ‘yi ren mai’ [appointed arteries] and ‘yang wei mai’ [positive dimension arteries] unexpectedly flow in reverse?” Ouyang Feng asked.

That female voice answered, “You didn’t want to wait, your strength is wanting.” This voice was clearly Huang Rong’s

voice, Guo Jing had no doubt whatsoever. He was so surprised and happy at the same time that he became giddy and faltered, almost lost his conscience. Because of this excitement the wound on his neck was broken, blood seeped through the wrapped cloth; but he did not seem to notice it.

He heard Ouyang Feng turn angry, "By noon tomorrow the sword meet will start; how can I practice leisurely? Quickly translate the whole manual for me, don't try to mess with me."

At last Guo Jing understood why Ouyang Feng practiced internal energy cultivation right there; turned out he was anxious about the sword meet and wanted to get a quick result. He heard Huang Rong laugh, "You have made an agreement with my Jing Gege; he would spare your life three times in exchange of you not compelling me against my wishes. You have to wait until I am happy enough to teach you."

Hearing her say the word 'my Jing Gege' a sweet, happy feeling flooded Guo Jing's heart. He was almost unable to refrain from leaping out and shout his delight.

Ouyang Feng coldly said, "This is important, my business today takes precedence over all agreements I made in the past." After he said that, he moved his arms, flexed his body and stood right-side up. Then he walked toward the cave in big strides.

"You are shameless!" Huang Rong called out, "I am not going to teach you!"

Ouyang Feng grinned wickedly, "I want to see if you are going to teach me or not," he said in low voice.

Guo Jing heard Huang Rong cry out, "Aiyo!" then he heard Ouyang Feng's cold laugh, followed by a sound of ripping clothes. At a moment like this Guo Jing did not have any time to think whether it was appropriate to fight anybody using his martial art; he leaped out and shouted, "Rong'er! I am here!" With the left palm guarding in front of his body he rushed into the cave.

Ouyang Feng's left hand was grabbing Huang Rong's bamboo stick, while his right hand was just about to grab her left arm. Huang Rong launched the 'bang tiau lai quan' [carrying a skin-diseased dog on a stick] by slanting her stick in front of her body and with a jerk pulled the stick from Ouyang Feng's hand. Ouyang Feng shouted and was about to continue his attack when suddenly he heard Guo Jing's voice outside.

Ouyang Feng was the grand master of his martial art school; he had never broken his words to anybody. This time it was in his desperation that he used force against Huang Rong; when suddenly Guo Jing arrived. His face turned beet red, he was ashamed of breaking his own agreement. He flicked his sleeve to cover his own face then fast as lightning he darted through Guo Jing's side, went out of the cave in a hurry and in a moment not even his shadow was to be seen.

Guo Jing rushed forward to grip Huang Rong's hands, he called out, "I almost died thinking about you!" He was so agitated that his whole body shivered.

Huang Rong pulled her hands out and coldly said, "Who are you? Why are you holding my hands?"

Guo Jing was stunned. "I ... I am Guo Jing. You ... you are not dead. I ... I ..." he stuttered.

"I don't know you!" Huang Rong cut him off; and then she went out the cave.



Guo Jing followed her outside, repeatedly bowing in front of her. "Rong'er, Rong'er, please listen to me!" he begged.

"Hmm," Huang Rong snorted, "Do you think you can call Rong'er's name just like that? What are you?"

Guo Jing opened his mouth wide, but did not know what to say.

Huang Rong looked at him; she saw he was rather thin, his face haggard; for an instant she felt sorry for him. But immediately she remembered how he had dumped her over and over; her anger flared. She took a step forward.

Guo Jing was really anxious, he pulled her sleeve and said, "Please listen to me."

"Speak!" Huang Rong said.

"I saw your golden hair band and black sable fur coat on the marsh, I thought you ..." Guo Jing said. But Huang Rong cut him off again, "Very well, you wanted me to listen to you, and I did!" She pulled her sleeve and walked away.

Guo Jing felt awkward and anxious at the same time. He knew how exceptionally mule-headed Huang Rong could be; he was afraid he might lose her again but he did not know how to express himself. Seeing her sleeve floating while she was climbing the mountain, he had no choice but silently follow.

When she came across Guo Jing earlier, Huang Rong was overwhelmed with mixed feeling. She recalled how she deliberately threw Ouyang Feng from her trail by leaving her golden hair band and her black sable fur coat on the marsh. Then heartbroken she headed back to the east. Her intention was to go back to the Peach Blossom Island to see her father; unfortunately when she reached Shandong she

fell sick with nobody to care for her. On her sickbed, while her body was either feverishly hot or cold, she lamented the fact that Guo Jing was a fickle lover; she regretted that her parents had given birth to her that now she had to endure pain and sufferings. When she recovered from her illness she came across Ouyang Feng on the southern Shandong road; and was compelled to follow him to Mount Hua to explain the manual to him.

Looking back to the past she hated everything that had happened. She heard Guo Jing was following her closely. When she walked quickly, Guo Jing also walked quickly; when she slowed down, Guo Jing also slowed down. After walking for a while she turned around abruptly and shouted, "Why are you following me?"

"I will forever follow you, I will never leave you as long as I live," Guo Jing said.

Huang Rong sneered, "You are the Great Khan's son-in-law, what do you want from me, a poor little girl?"

"The Great Khan has caused my mother's death, how can I become his son-in-law?" Guo Jing said.

Huang Rong was angry, her entire face turned red, "Good! I thought you still have a heart for me. Turned out the Great Khan has kicked you out! Now that you are not the Master Consort anymore you come looking for the poor little girl. Am I that cheap that you can bully me as you wish?" Speaking to this point she could not control her anger any longer and broke in uncontrollable sobs.

Seeing her bursting in tears Guo Jing was flabbergasted. He wanted to say some comforting words, but he was tongue-tied, did not know what to say. After stayed silent for half a day he finally opened his mouth, "Rong'er, I am here. You want to hit me or kill me; you can do what you want."

“Why would I want to hit you or kill you?” Huang Rong asked mournfully, “Let’s just say that we have known each other in vain. Please, I am asking you, stop following me.”

Seeing she was not willing to forgive him, Guo Jing’s countenance paled. With a trembling voice he asked, “What do I have to do to make you understand what’s in my heart?”

“Today you are good to me, but if tomorrow you see Huazheng Meizi or Huazheng Jiejie [elder sister], you will immediately shove me away from your brain,” Huang Rong said, “Only if you die in front of me will I believe what you said.”

The blood in Guo Jing’s chest boiled; he nodded and turned around, walked in big strides toward the cliff nearby. It was actually Mount Hua’s most dangerous place, called the ‘she shen ya’ [to give one’s life cliff]; whoever jumped from this place would certainly meet a cruel death.

Knowing his strong-willed temper well, Huang Rong realized Guo Jing was capable of doing what he said he would do. Hastily she dashed forward to grab his clothes. Her hand pulled hard and she jumped over Guo Jing’s shoulder that a moment later she was the one standing at the edge of the cliff. She was angry and anxious at the same time; with tears in her eyes she said, “Fine! I know you don’t care about me one bit. I spoke thoughtless words out of anger and you didn’t miss that opportunity. I am telling you: you don’t need to get angry with me; just don’t see me anymore.”

Huang Rong’s body trembled, her face was snow-white; she stood on the edge of the cliff, leaning against ice-covered rock. She looked like a white ‘cha hua’ [camellia?] gently swaying in the wind.

Because he did not care about his own life, Guo Jing had exerted his strength to jump into the canyon below; but now seeing Huang Rong on the cliff edge he was afraid she might lost her footing. "Come over here," he hastily said.

Huang Rong could hear the affection in his voice, she was unable to restrain from feeling sad; she cried, "Who wants to hear your fake words? I was sick in Shandong, nobody cared for me; you didn't even come looking for me. I was captured by that old scoundrel Ouyang Feng and was unable to escape; you didn't come to rescue me. My mother did not want me; she died and left me to fend for myself. My father did not want me; he did not come looking for me. Worst of all, you obviously did not want me either! There is nobody in this world wants me, nobody loves me!" While saying that she stomped her feet and cried loudly; sounded like she was releasing all anger, sadness, and frustration pent-up for several days.

Guo Jing's heart was overwhelmed with love and affection, yet he realized what she said was not wrong; the more he listened to her, the more he hated himself.

A cold wind blew, Huang Rong felt cold, her body trembled a little bit. Guo Jing took out his outer coat and was about to drape it across her shoulder when suddenly someone shouted from the side of the cliff, "Who has such guts, dared to bully my Miss Huang?" A man with white beard and long hair appeared, climbing up the cliff. It was none other than the Old Urchin Zhou Botong.

Guo Jing's attention was focused on Huang Rong; he did not care who came toward them. Huang Rong was not in the mood to joke around, she shouted, "Old Urchin, I told you to kill Qiu Qianren. Where is his head?"

Zhou Botong giggled, he did not know how to answer her; so before she pursued further, he tried to shift the blame, "Miss Huang, who made you angry? The Old Urchin will vent your anger for you."

Huang Rong pointed her finger to Guo Jing, "Who else if not him?" she said.

Zhou Botong only knew he had to win Huang Rong's heart, so without saying anything his hand moved; once with the back of his hand, then another with his palm, 'Slap! Slap!' he whacked Guo Jing's ears twice.

Guo Jing's mind was someplace else, he did not guard against any attack; the Old Urchin's hand was rather heavy, Guo Jing's vision turned black and his cheeks were swollen red.

"Miss Huang, is that enough?" Zhou Botong asked, "If not enough I will beat him some more."

Seeing Guo Jing's face was swollen with red five-finger print on each cheek, Huang Rong's anger turned into affection; and her affection toward Guo Jing turned into anger toward Zhou Botong. "I am angry at him, what does it have to do with you? Who told you to beat him up?" she angrily said, "I told you to kill Qiu Qianren, why didn't you do what I told you?"

Zhou Botong stuck out his tongue, could not answer her question; he said in his heart, "Turned out in wanting to beat a horse fart the Old Urchin has beaten the horse's hoof instead." In that difficult situation he suddenly heard from behind the cliff some noise of weapons clashing and indistinct voices of people fighting. He thought if he did not slip away right now, he would not get another chance; he called out immediately, "Most probably that old Qiu Qianren has arrived. I am going to kill him at once." Before he

finished speaking, he had disappeared behind the cliff in a flash.

Actually, if it was really Qiu Qianren, Zhou Botong would not dare to even come near to him. That day Zhou Botong blindly fought with Qiu Qianren, Ouyang Feng and Guo Jing inside the stone house in the western region; Guo Jing escaped and Ouyang Feng followed not too long afterwards. Then Qiu Qianren finally found an opportunity to run away. Zhou Botong did not give up chasing him until Qiu Qianren was exhausted. Qiu Qianren was furious and desperate; he was the clan leader of a big clan in Wulin world, and he was forced to run away from the enemy, he felt really humiliated. He thought he would be better off killing himself rather than falling into the enemy's hands and suffer further humiliation. He caught a glimpse of several vipers on the sand and stone by the road side. He knew this kind of viper was very poisonous; once he got bitten, the whole body would be numb immediately and he would die without too much pain. Therefore, he caught one viper and held it by pinching the snake at seven inches from the head; he called out, "Zhou Botong the old thief, look here!"

He was about to let the viper bite his own hand; but who would have thought that Zhou Botong was extremely afraid of snakes that he cried out, turned around and ran away. Qiu Qianren was startled, but after half a day, he realized Zhou Botong was afraid of his snake. Unexpectedly the situation was reversed to his benefit. With his left hand he caught another viper, and shouted loudly he gave Zhou Botong a chase.

Zhou Botong was terrified, he ran like crazy. Qiu Qianren was known as the 'tie zhang shui shang piao' [iron palm floating on the water]; his lightness kungfu was superior from Zhou Botong's. If he was not scared of Zhou Botong, he would have caught up with him early on.

Two men chasing each other noisily until the day turned dark. Zhou Botong ran with all his might, Qiu Qianren was actually looking for an opportunity to escape; he was secretly amused and pretended to chase Zhou Botong seriously. On the second day Zhou Botong found a horse which he quickly mounted and rode back into the east; afraid that Qiu Qianren might overtake him.

Seeing Zhou Botong sneaked out, Huang Rong cast a sidelong glance toward Guo Jing, sighed, and lowered her head without saying anything.

“Rong’er,” Guo Jing called.

“Hmm,” Huang Rong lightly uttered.

Guo Jing wanted to apologize and asked for her forgiveness, but realizing he was clumsy, he was afraid he might say something wrong and actually stirred up her anger. Two people stood side by side in the wind; suddenly Huang Rong sneezed. Immediately Guo Jing took his coat off and spread it over Huang Rong’s body. Huang Rong lowered her head, seemingly oblivious to him. Suddenly they heard Zhou Botong’s loud laughter, followed by his shouts, “Wonderful! Wonderful!”

Huang Rong held out her hand, touching Guo Jing’s hand, “Jing Gege, let’s take a look,” she said with a low voice. Guo Jing was so happy that tears rolled down his cheeks, he could not say anything. Huang Rong wiped out the tears with her sleeve; she laughed and said, “You have tears on your face; also fingerprints on your cheeks. People will say I beat you until you cry.” Her smile was so graceful; signifying the two of them had been reconciled. After this incident, actually the bond between them grew deeper.

Hand in hand the two of them walked down the cliff; they saw Zhou Botong was bending over with laughter, he

looked so proud of himself. Qiu Chuji stood on the side with a sword in his hand. Sha Tongtian, Peng Lianhu, Lingzhi Shangren, and Hou Tonghai, four people were seen with weapons in their hands in various postures; some were attacking, some were retreating or eluding an attack, but they all looked like motionless wooden statues. Turned out their acupoints had been sealed by Zhou Botong.

Zhou Botong said, "The other day I made some pills from the dirt on my body and gave them to you. But you stinky thieves are actually crafty and smart; as soon as you found out they were not poisonous, you did not want to obey your grandfather anymore. Hmm, hmm ... how about today?"

Even though he managed to overpower these four men, but actually he had no idea what to do with them. Hence, as soon as he saw Guo Jing and Huang Rong walked over he said, "Miss Huang, I present these four stinky thieves to you!"

"What do I want to do with them?" Huang Rong said, "Hmm, you don't want to kill them, you also don't want to release them. You subdued these four stinky thieves, yet don't have any idea what to do with them. Call me 'Good Elder Sister' three times, I will teach you what to do."

Zhou Botong was delighted; immediately he called, "Good Elder Sister!" three times; each time he added a cupping of his fists.

Huang Rong pursed her lips and laughed. Pointing her finger to Peng Lianhu she said, "Search his pocket."

Zhou Botong immediately complied; from Peng Lianhu's body he took out a ring with poisonous needle on it, and two bottles of antidotes.



"He had once used this needle to prick your Martial Nephew Ma Yu, now prick him several times with that same needle," Huang Rong said.

Peng Lianhu and the others could hear everything clearly, they were so frightened that they felt their souls were leaving their bodies; but their acupoints were sealed, they could not move. They felt severe pain since each of them was pricked several times by Zhou Botong.

"The antidote is in your hand, whatever you want them to do, I want to see if they will dare to defy," Huang Rong said.

Zhou Botong was delighted; he rubbed some dirt from his body and mixed them with the antidote, he made some pills from the mixture and gave the pills to Qiu Chuji. He said, "You take these four stinky thieves as prisoners; take them to Mount Zhongnan, imprison them at the Chongyang Palace for twenty years. If they behave well along the way, give each of them one of my wonder pill; otherwise let them enjoy the poison. This is called taking consequences for their own actions. Show no mercy!"

Qiu Chuji bowed and complied.

Huang Rong laughed, "Old Urchin, what you said was very reasonable. I haven't seen you for a year and look how far you have progressed!"

Zhou Botong was very pleased with himself, he unsealed Peng Lianhu and the others' acupoints and said, "You go to the Chongyang Palace, stay there meditating your lives for twenty years. If you are really willing to repent, you might still be able to live as good people in the future. But if you don't want to repent, hmmm ... just know that our Quanzhen people are experts in killing people without batting an eye; we can torture without creasing an eyebrow; we can make you four stinky thieves into

meatballs and everybody can come and eat you. By that time I want to see what other trick you have in your sleeve?"

Peng Lianhu and the others did not dare to say anything; they only nodded and mumbled their consents. Qiu Chuji stifled his laughter; he bade Zhou Botong farewell, then with a sword in his hand herded four people walking down the mountain.

Huang Rong laughed, "Old Urchin, when did you learn to teach others? The front part of your speech made a lot of sense, but the latter part was a lot of nonsense."

Zhou Botong looked up to the sky and laughed; but suddenly he saw toward his left there was a flashing white light. Apparently it was a weapon reflecting the sunlight. "Well, what is that?" he called out.

Jing and Rong lifted their heads to see, but the flashing light was gone. Zhou Botong was afraid Huang Rong would raise Qiu Qianren's matter to him, he quickly said, "Let me take a look." And he flew to the nearby peak.

Jing and Rong two people had a lot to talk; they looked for a cave and poured out their hearts' content to each other. They talked and talked until the sun disappeared behind the western peak; still there were more to talk about. Guo Jing took some dried food from his backpack and gave some to Huang Rong.

Huang Rong ate and smiled, "That old scoundrel Ouyang Feng compelled me to explain to him the Nine Yin Manual; his source was the one you wrote randomly, so I also gave him a random explanation. He accepted it as real, and he trained hard on it for several months. I told him that this type of martial art has to be practiced upside down; he really turned head over heels training diligently. He

managed to reverse the whole body passage through which vital energy circulates. It was really not easy; his 'yin wei' [negative dimension], 'yang wei' [positive dimension], yin and yang; four main arteries are flowing in reverse. I don't know how he will look like if his entire system flows in reverse." Having said that she giggled.

Guo Jing was also smiling, "No wonder I saw him upside down in the middle of the road," he said, "It was really not easy to do."

"You are coming to Mount Hua; are you going to join the contest to win the title Number One Martial Artist of the World?" Huang Rong asked.

"Rong'er, why are you teasing me?" Guo Jing said, "I am here to ask Zhou Dage on how I can forget the martial arts I have already learned." And then he told Huang Rong everything he had pondered in his heart these past several days.

Huang Rong leaned her head slightly and thought for a moment. "Ay! It's good if we can forget it," she said, "The more we train, the stronger our martial art become; but actually our heart is not getting happier. I wish we were just like little children who don't know anything; nothing burdened our minds, no worry, no anxiety." She forgot that as one grew older, the more hardship and anxiety one would have to face; it had nothing to do with whether one's martial art skill was high or not.

Huang Rong continued, "I heard Ouyang Feng saying that tomorrow is the sword meet day; I am sure my father will come to this mountain. You said you are not going to join the contest; how about we think of something to help my father win the title?"

“Rong’er,” Guo Jing said, “It’s not that I don’t want to help you, but I think in term of conduct, Benevolent Master Hong is superior to your father.”

Originally Huang Rong was leaning against Guo Jing’s body, but as she heard him saying her father was not good, she pushed him away in anger. Guo Jing was startled, he was confused. But suddenly Huang Rong laughed, “Hmm, actually Benevolent Master Hong’s treatment to us was not bad. Let’s just not help any of them, what do you think?”

“Both your father and Benevolent Master Hong are honorable warriors; they won’t like it if we secretly help them,” Guo Jing said.

“Fine! Now you are saying that I am sly and crafty, that I am a wicked traitor coward?” Huang Rong said pulling up her face.

“I am sorry,” Guo Jing said, “I am a fool, always say wrong things and provoke you to anger.” His face looked really terrified.

Huang Rong stifled her laughter, “I don’t know how many more times I am going to be mad at you.”

Guo Jing was perplexed; he scratched his head and looked at her with blank expression.

“If you don’t dump me anymore, we will have many days to be together. I really don’t care how many more times you are going to say stupid things,” Huang Rong said.

Guo Jing was ecstatic, he gripped her hands tight and earnestly said, “How can I dump you? How can I?”

“It was because the princess didn’t want you that naturally you have no choice but looking for me, a poor little girl,” Huang Rong said.

What Huang Rong said had brought back a flood of sad memories into Guo Jing's mind; he remembered his mother's tragic death in the desert, he looked so dispirited and was silent. It was a new moon, silver light like water shone on them. Huang Rong saw his dejected countenance and realized she had offended him deeply; she quickly tried to change the subject. "Jing Gege, let us not talk about past matters. Being together with you like this makes my heart so happy. How about I let you kiss my cheek?"

Guo Jing's entire face turned red; indeed he did not dare to kiss her. Huang Rong flashed a captivating smile; she was fully aware that she had embarrassed both Guo Jing and herself, so she changed the subject again, "On the sword meet tomorrow, who do you say will win?" she asked.

"That is really difficult to say," Guo Jing replied, "I wonder if Reverend Yideng is coming?"

"The reverend has entered emptiness; he would not want to fight over empty reputation," Huang Rong reasoned.

Guo Jing nodded his agreement, "I think so too. Your father, Benevolent Master Hong, Big Brother Zhou, Qiu Qianren and Ouyang Feng, five people; each one is the grandmaster of their respective school, each one has their own unique skill. I am just wondering if Benevolent Master Hong has recovered from his injury. Can his skill level back to where it was?" Remembering his master Guo Jing was saddened.

"Reasonably speaking, the Old Urchin's martial art is the strongest," Huang Rong said, "However, if he does not use the martial art from the Nine Yin Manual, then he is still inferior to the other four."

Two people talked until Huang Rong felt tired; then she leaned on Guo Jing's bosom and fell asleep. Guo Jing was also weary and was dozing off when suddenly he heard

footsteps approaching. Two dark shadows, one in front of the other, were rushing over the cliff. Those two people's clothes were fluttering in the wind, they were running very fast. From their footwork, looked like the one in the front was the Old Urchin Zhou Botong, and the one pursuing him was surprisingly Qiu Qianren. Guo Jing did not know that Qiu Qianren had used vipers to scare Zhou Botong off; he was baffled, in the western region Qiu Qianren was running away for his life because of Zhou Botong, how come the situation was reversed now? Lightly he nudged Huang Rong and whispered in her ear, "Look!"

Huang Rong raised her head and saw under the moonlight Zhou Botong eloped to the east and escaped to the west; did not dare to face the enemy at all. Zhou Botong was heard shouting, "Old thief surnamed Qiu, I have somebody here who is an expert in catching viper; you'd better run away as quick as you can!"

Qiu Qianren laughed, "Do you think I am a three-year old kid?" he said.

"Guo Xiongdi [Brother Guo], Miss Huang! Come and help me, please!" Zhou Botong shouted.

Guo Jing was about to leap out, but Huang Rong pushed his chest back, "Don't move!" she hissed.

Zhou Botong had run around in circles yet did not see Jing and Rong two people come out, he started to curse, "Stinky Kid, Crafty Girl, if you don't come out, I am going to curse your ancestors to the eighteenth generation."

Huang Rong stood up and laughed, "I don't want to come out, curse if you can."

Zhou Botong saw the vipers in Qiu Qianren's hands lifted their heads high with their tongues stuck out; he was so

scared that his knees turned into jelly. "Miss Huang, please come, please come. What about if I curse my own ancestors to the eighteenth generation?" he begged.

Qiu Qianren was shocked to see Jing and Rong two people were standing nearby. Quickly he cooked up some ideas to slip away; otherwise if those three people ganged up against him, definitely things would not go well for him. Tomorrow would be another story; he would fight each of them on a one-to-one battle, he was not afraid of any of them. He started to move his feet, but before running away he flung the vipers toward Zhou Botong's face.

Zhou Botong wielded his sleeve in panic, he stepped aside to elude; suddenly there was a light plopping sound and he felt something cold fell on his neck, straight through his collar into his back. That something wiggled and bounced around inside his clothes; it felt slippery. He was so scared, it felt like his soul was leaving his body. "I am dying, I am dying!" he cried. He did not dare to put his hands into his clothes to pull the 'snakes' out; he only jumped around wildly. Suddenly he felt the 'snake' bit him in the chest; he thought he really died this time, his whole body tingled with numbness and he fell down to the ground.

Jing and Rong two people were shocked, they quickly leaped forward to help. Seeing Zhou Botong suddenly fall down, Qiu Qianren was also surprised; he was about to seek a way to go down the mountain when suddenly a black shadow appeared from among the trees. That shadow coldly said, "Old thief Qiu, today you can't run away anymore."

That person's back was facing the moon, so Qiu Qianren could not see that person's face clearly. Qiu Qianren felt a chill creep up his back. "Who are you?" he barked.

Zhou Botong was lying on the ground, bedazzled. He felt he would soon be gone to the underworld; but suddenly he felt someone helped him up. "Master Zhou, don't be afraid, that is not a snake," he heard that person said. Zhou Botong was startled, he quickly stood up, but that cold thing on his back started to bounce around again; he jumped around and shouted madly, "It is biting me, it's a snake, it's a snake!"

"It's a 'jin wa wa' [golden baby doll, see Chapter 29] fish, not a snake," that person said. By now Jing and Rong two people could see clearly that person's appearance; turned out it was the Fisherman from the Fisherman, Woodcutter, Farmer, and Scholar, four main disciples of Reverend Yideng. They saw him stretching out his arm and took a 'jin wa wa' from Zhou Botong's clothes.

Turned out that fisherman saw a pair of 'jin wa wa' in a creek nearby; he caught them and kept them in his bosom. One of them slipped and jumped high into a tree; as luck had it, it fell down inside Zhou Botong's collar. That 'jin wa wa' did not bite, but Zhou Botong was so scared of snakes that he imagined this cold and slippery thing was actually a viper biting his back. If the Fisherman was one step late, Zhou Botong might pass out of fright.

Zhou Botong opened his eyes and saw the fisherman; but he was still in shock. He knew he had met this person before, but he could not remember who it was. He turned his head to see Qiu Qianren was walking step-by-step backward, while the black shadow in front of him walked step-by-step forward, slowly approaching. Zhou Botong was a little bit relaxed but then he was startled and frightened out of his wits; he saw clearly that the black shadow was precisely the Concubine Liu Ying Gu from the Dali country's royal palace.



Qiu Qianren was led to believe at the present time only Zhou Botong's martial art was superior to his. If he managed to scare Zhou Botong away with his snakes, then on the sword meet the next day he was certain he would have a great chance to come out the winner. Unexpectedly on the eve of the sword meet Ying Gu appeared. That day on the 'qing long tan' [green dragon shore] she madly fought him; he thought that if this granny entangled him in another fight while his enemies were standing on the side; his life would be in grave danger. But then he heard she hissed with a throaty voice, "Give me back my son's life!"

Qiu Qianren's heart turned cold; he thought that that night when he entered the royal palace and injured her son in his attempt to force Emperor Duan to waste his strength he had disguised himself carefully. Who would have thought that the emperor did not save the child's life, and now she had somehow learned the truth? He forced a smile and said, "Crazy Granny, why are you bothering me?"

"Give me back my son's life!" Ying Gu called out.

"What son?" Qiu Qianren asked, "Your son died, it has nothing to do with me."

"Hmm, that night I did not see your face, but I remember your laughter," Ying Gu said, "You laugh, now! Laugh! Laugh!"

Qiu Qianren saw her stretching both hands to pounce on him; he withdrew two steps, slightly leaned his body to the side, then his left palm slapped his right, and his right palm swept diagonally to strike Ying Gu's abdomen. It was the fiercest one of his thirteen stances Iron Palms, called the 'yin yang gui yi' [negative and positive converge into one].

Ying Gu realized the fierceness of this attack; she used the Loach Maneuver to evade. Who would have thought that

the enemy's strike was so swift that before she could even move her feet, his palm was already less than half a foot from her body. Ying Gu felt a stab of pain in her heart; knowing that her hope of seeking revenge was shattered. Disregarding his palm, she jumped forward with the intention of grabbing his body so that both of them would fall down into the canyon below. Suddenly she heard a gust of wind and a fist cut like a knife in front of her. Just before his palm reached its target, Qiu Qianren was forced to retract his arm and parry that incoming fist. He was angry, "Old Urchin, it's you again!"

When Zhou Botong saw the danger threatening Ying Gu, he used the skill he learned from the Nine Yin Manual to its fullest extent to defeat the Iron Palm stance. Zhou Botong did not dare to look straight to Ying Gu; putting his back to her he said, "Ying Gu, you are not this old scoundrel's match. Quickly go! I will go too!"

He was about to fly down the mountain when suddenly Ying Gu called out, "Zhou Botong, why don't you avenge your son?"

Zhou Botong was dumbstruck. "What? My son?"

"Exactly," Ying Gu said, "Your son is killed by Qiu Qianren."

Zhou Botong still did not know that his affair with Ying Gu had resulted in their having a child. His mind was muddled; he was at a loss. He turned his head to see that there were several more people standing next to Ying Gu; other than Guo Jing and Huang Rong, there were Reverend Yideng and his four disciples.

At that time Qiu Qianren had walked away from the edge of the cliff less than three feet, suddenly he saw in front of him a group of formidable enemies while the terrain they were on was really dangerous. He knew he was facing a grave

danger. He clapped his hands and boldly said, "I am climbing the Mount Hua to fight over the 'Number One Martial Artist in the World' title. Hmm, hmm ... all of you gang up to get rid of a powerful opponent. It's truly despicable!"

Zhou Botong thought what this old thief said was reasonable, he said, "All right, I am going to wait until after the sword meet tomorrow, then I am going to take your dog life."

Ying Gu angrily called out, "I want to seek revenge, how can I wait until tomorrow?"

Huang Rong also said, "Old Urchin, toward a person with a good faith we speak with a good faith; toward a deceitful person we speak deceitfully. Let us just get rid of him once and for all; I want to see what he is going to do."

Qiu Qianren face turned deathly pale, he realized his precarious situation; but suddenly he got an idea, "Why do you want to kill me?" he called out.

The scholar replied, "You have done all kinds of evil deeds; everybody deserved to punish you."

Qiu Qianren lifted his face to the sky and laughed, "Speaking about martial art, you rely on numbers to bully me, certainly I am not your match. But speaking about right and wrong, good and evil, hey, hey ... Qiu Qianren is not alone. Whoever among you who has never killed anybody or done anything wrong; you can start punishing me. I will stretch out my neck to die in your hand; if I even creased my eyebrows; don't consider me a real man."

Reverend Yideng heaved a deep sigh, he was the first to step back then he lowered his head and sat cross-legged on the ground. Everybody else was deeply affected by Qiu

Qianren's words; each thought how they have committed countless errors in their lives. The Fisherman, Woodcutter, Farmer, and the Scholar were all high-ranking government officials of the Dali country; they had killed people. Although they were acting in enforcing the justice, in the end they had unavoidably made some mistakes.

Zhou Botong and Ying Gu looked at each other; they recalled the love and hate between them, and each felt ashamed. During the expedition to the west Guo Jing had killed numerous people, and he still blamed himself for that. Huang Rong remembered how she had made her father suffer, how she was being an unfilial daughter, and how many times she had deceived others; truly she had committed not a few faults of her own.

Qiu Qianren thought that his speech had silenced everybody, now it was a good time to slip away; therefore, with big strides he walked pass Guo Jing's left side to leave. He saw Guo Jing step aside to let him go; he exerted his strength and about to flee when suddenly a bamboo stick appeared from behind the mountain rock, blocking his way. This bamboo stick was so swift, Qiu Qianren's left palm flew up, his wrist made a turn, trying to catch the stick's end; but unexpectedly the stick poked three times swiftly, targeting three major acupoints on his chest. Qiu Qianren was shocked; he felt that the bamboo stick's incoming force was like a strong wind. He was unable to neither parry nor evade, and had no choice but step backwards and thus return to where he started, by the edge of the cliff. From behind the rock a dark shadow appeared with the stick in his hand, and then stood up in front of him.

"Shifu!" Guo Jing and Huang Rong cried out. The 'jiu zhi shen gai' [nine-fingered divine beggar] Hong Qigong had arrived.

“Stinky beggar, you come to meddle. It’s not time for the sword meet yet,” Qiu Qianren cursed.

“I came to get rid of a traitor. Who wants to have a contest with you?” Hong Qigong said.

“Fine! What a great hero and warrior [actually, here he used the term ‘da ying xiong da xia shi’ - I don’t know how to differentiate ‘ying xiong’ and ‘xia’] you are, and I am a traitor. You are a good man and have never committed any misconduct,” Qiu Qianren said.

“That’s correct,” Hong Qigong replied, “During my lifetime the Old Beggar has killed 231 people; all these 231 people were wicked, if not greedy and corrupt officials, then they were local bullies or criminals who oppressed common people; they were all evil people who had no regard of justice and honor. The Old Beggar is a glutton, but in all my life I have never killed an innocent person. Qiu Qianren, you are the 232nd person!”

His speech had made Qiu Qianren shiver with fear; he felt like his life had been taken from him. Hong Qigong continued, “Qiu Qianren, your Iron Palm Clan’s past Clan Leader Shangguan Jian Nan was a true hero; he devoted his entire life to serve the country, he was loyal till the day he died. Didn’t your master advise you to be a real man? You succeeded your master as the Iron Palm Clan Leader; yet you colluded with the Jins, betraying your own country. When you die, do you have any face to meet your master and Shangguan Jian Nan, Shangguan Bangzhu? You climb Mount Hua in a vain attempt to compete against other martial art experts to win the ‘Number One Martial Artist in the World’. Not only your martial art is inferior to everybody else’s; but even if your martial art were matchless, which hero of this world would want to submit to a traitor who sells his own country?”

This speech was like a bucket of cold water drenched over Qiu Qianren; everything he had ever done in the past dozens of years came into his mind one by one. He remembered his master's instructions. How his master at his deathbed had imparted the Iron Palm Clan rules and regulations after he assumed the Clan Leader position; earnestly warning him to be a patriot, loyal to his country and love its people. Who would have thought that the older he got, the stronger his martial art became, the more he forgot his oath to love his country; he has become a traitor and a criminal, killing people who oppose his personal ambition. He fell deeper and deeper, until the clan members who were loyal and righteous left him, and in their place he took criminals as his disciples. He went as far as changing the upright Iron Palm Clan into a gang of bandits; sheltering evil people and support their evil practices; carrying out all kinds of evil things.

He lifted up his eyes to see the bright moon in the sky; he lowered his eyes to see Hong Qigong's bright pair of eyes with a penetrating gaze looking at him. Suddenly his conscience was awakened; he felt that among all of his life conducts not one could be called honorable. His body was drenched in cold sweats; he sighed, "Hong Bangzhu, you are right." He turned around and jumped into the canyon below.

Hong Qigong was holding tight his bamboo stick to guard against Qiu Qianren lest he would launch a sudden attack from shame. This person's martial art is nothing to be trifled with; in his desperation his attack must be really fierce. Not in a million years would he expect him to suddenly attempt to commit suicide. He was stunned, but suddenly a grey shadow flew by his side; Reverend Yideng had arrived at the cliff edge. Initially he was sitting cross-legged, and when he moved, he was still cross-legged. His

left arm stretched out and grabbed Qiu Qianren's feet, pulled him strongly back to safety.

"Zhan zai, zhan cai!" he said, "The sea of bitterness knows no bounds; turn around and you will see the shore. You have already repented of your previous wrong doings; it's not too late to become a new man."

Qiu Qianren wept loudly, he knelt down in front of Yideng. He had millions of things he wanted to say, but was unable to utter a single word.

Ying Gu saw his back was in front of her; it was a very good opportunity for her to seek her revenge. She took a dagger from her bosom and fiercely thrust it into Qiu Qianren's back.

"Wait!" Zhou Botong called out; stretching his hand to block Ying Gu's dagger.

Ying Gu was angry, "What are you doing?" she asked sternly.

Since the first time Zhou Botong saw Ying Gu, he had been scared. Now that she scolded him, he shouted, "Aiyo!" and turned around, rushing down the mountain.

"Where are you going?" Ying Gu called out and immediately pursued him.

"I have tummy ache, I need to defecate!" Zhou Botong shouted. Ying Gu was startled only for a second, then she ignored him and did not stop pursuing Zhou Botong.

Zhou Botong was stunned, "Aiyo! Not good! I have shits all over my pants; it stinks to high heaven. Don't come over here!" he anxiously shouted.

Ying Gu had been searching for him for over twenty years; she believed that if she missed him again this time, she would not see him anymore. Hence she did not care whether Zhou Botong was really defecating or just pretending, she kept pursuing him.

Zhou Botong heard the sound of footsteps approaching; he was scared out of his wits. Initially he said he was defecating to scare Ying Gu out from coming near him; he was hoping that he would find an opportunity to slip away. Who would have thought that Ying Gu ignored his words. He was so frightened that he cried out; and from pretending, Zhou Botong actually did start urinating and defecating.

Guo Jing and Huang Rong were amused to watch this couple who quickly disappear beyond the cliff in the distant; and then they turned their heads to see Reverend Yideng was speaking in low voice on Qiu Qianren's ears. Qiu Qianren did not say anything, he simply nodded his head repeatedly. Yideng spoke for a long while then finally he stood up and said, "Let's go."

Jing and Rong two people hurriedly went forward to pay their respects; they also bowed to the Fisherman, the Woodcutter, the Farmer and the Scholar. Yideng held out his hand to stroke their heads; he looked at them tenderly with a gentle smile on his face. "Qi Xiong," he turned to Hong Qigong, "You are in good shape, your bravery is as great as I remember it; you also received these two fine disciples. I must congratulate you."

Hong Qigong bowed and said, "Reverend is also well."

Yideng smiled, "The mountain is tall and the river is long; till we meet again," he said. Putting his palms together he turned around and left.



“Tomorrow is the sword meet, why are you leaving?” Hong Qigong called out.

Yideng turned his head and smiled, “The Old Monk is an outsider; how could I dare to compete with world class heroes over a title? The Old Monk is here today to take care of twenty years’ worth of gratitude and grudges; and I am happy my intention has been achieved. Qi Xiong, who is the present age hero but you? Why are you being modest?” Again he put his palms together, took Qiu Qianren’s hand, and walked down the mountain.

The four main disciples of Dali bowed toward Hong Qigong then followed behind their master. The Scholar walked by Huang Rong’s side. Seeing her cheeks were glowing he raised his eyebrows and smiled while reciting a line, “On the marshy land there was a ‘chang chu’ tree, its branches are soft and willowy!”

Hearing him tease her, Huang Rong replied with another line, “The chicken perched on their roost, the evening has arrived.”

The Scholar laughed a big laughter, he cupped his fists and left.

Guo Jing was bewildered, “Rong’er,” he asked, “Was that another Sanskrit line?”

“No,” Huang Rong smiled, “It was from ‘the book of poems’” she explained.

Hearing they were exchanging poetry, Guo Jing did not ask further. Looking at him Huang Rong smiled. She thought, “This ‘zhuang yuan’ [honorable title conferred to the person who scored highest in the imperial examination] is really smart; he had guessed correctly what’s in my heart. The next lines of what he recited from the book of poems are

‘pleasure does not need knowledge, pleasure does not need a family, pleasure does not need a room’. It was about a maiden adoring a bachelor’s love song. It is very appropriate to Jing Gege’s situation; he was saying that this scattered brain dumb kid has finally found a wife. I am very happy!” Having thought this suddenly she uttered a soft cry, “Aiyo!”

“What is it?” Guo Jing hastily asked.

Huang Rong smiled and said, “The next lines of what I recited are ‘The sheep and the cows coming down, the sheep and the cows went into the pen.’ The poem says that it was getting late, the sheep and the cows from the hillside returned to the fold and the gate was closed. In short I called that ‘zhuang yuan’ an animal. But it can be considered that I called Reverend Yideng an animal too!”

Guo Jing did not pay too much attention to this poetry exchange; he was pondering on what Hong Qigong had said to Qiu Qianren earlier. His heart was heavy with doubts and anxiety for these past several days; all his questions were answered in just a few words. His mind became open and he understood, “Shifu said he has killed 231 people; but these 231 people were all wicked. As long as he did not kill an innocent person, then his conscience is clear. Look how Shifu reprimanded Qiu Qianren, physical prowess is useless. This Qiu Qianren’s martial art is not necessary below that of Shifu’s, but because his heart was not upright, he cowered in Shifu’s presence. As long as I use my martial art to uphold justice, why would I want to put my martial art behind?”

It was actually a clear cut truth, even Qiu Chuji had spoken to him about the same truth. It was not that he did not believe Qiu Chuji, it was just that he recently joined Genghis Khan’s expedition to the west; he saw with his own eyes the

terrible massacre, the cruelty on the battlefield, the suffering of the people, the tragic death of his mother under his own dagger; he loathed all kinds of war and violence and his mind was overwhelmed with this bitter thought. But after going through this deep thinking in his mind, finally his determination to do good deeds was getting stronger.

Jing and Rong two people went forward and kowtowed in front of their master; then they talked about things that happened after they parted. Turned out Hong Qigong followed Huang Yaoshi back to the Peach Blossom Island to tend to his injury. Using the method from the Nine Yin Manual he was able to revive his internal strength and open up the passages through which the vital energy circulate. It took him about half a year to heal his internal injury, then another half a year to recover his internal strength.

Huang Yaoshi was worried about his daughter; therefore, as soon as Hong Qigong's injury was healed, he went to the north looking for her. Hong Qigong left the island much later than Huang Yaoshi did, and only a few days ago he came across Lu Youjiao; thus for the most part he had learned what happened to his disciples Jing and Rong.

Three people talked for a while. Finally Guo Jing said, "Shifu, please take some rest. Come daybreak you will compete in the sword meet; you will need a lot of energy."

Hong Qigong laughed, "The older I get, my desire to outdo others is actually getting stronger; but thinking that very soon I am going to fight the Eastern Heretic and Western Poison, my heart is anxious. It is ridiculous! Rong'er, in the recent years your father's martial art has improved tremendously. Tell me, in the upcoming contest between your father and your Shifu, who is strong and who is weak?"

Huang Rong replied, "The martial art of yours, Senior, and that of my father's are always difficult to compare; but now you have mastered the 'jiu yin shen gong' [nine yin divine energy]; how can my father be your match? Later when I see my father I am going to advise him not to compete with you; he'd better go back home to the Peach Blossom Island early on."

Listening to her manner of speaking, Hong Qigong felt something was strange. After pondering it for a while he understood her intention. He laughed loudly and said, "You don't need to talk in circle to me; I got the 'jiu yin shen gong' from you two. You don't have to goad me; the Old Beggar's face is not thick enough to use that skill. When I compete with the Old Heretic Huang later, I am going to use only my own original skills."

Huang Rong was expecting him to say these exact words; so she smiled and said, "Shifu, if you lose under my father's hand, I am going to prepare a hundred types of food for you to eat. So winning you will no doubt be delighted, losing you will also be happy."

Hong Qigong swallowed his saliva. "Hmm, this girl's heart is not good. You provoke me then you bribe me. You are wickedly shrewd; you hope wholeheartedly your own father will win."

Huang Rong smiled, but before she could answer Hong Qigong suddenly stood up. He pointed his finger toward Huang Rong's back and called out, "Old Poison, you arrived very early!"

Guo Jing and Huang Rong were startled; quickly they sprang up and stood next to Hong Qigong. They turned their heads and saw Ouyang Feng with his tall stature standing nearby. He arrived so quietly that these two

people were not aware of his presence; they were greatly astonished.

**End of Chapter 39.**

## Chapter 40 - Sword Meet of Mount Hua

Translated by Frans Soetomo



*Genghis Khan fetched his iron bow and aimed the arrow toward the female eagle. The eagle was*

*able to skew itself and sweep its wing to strike the arrow. The male eagle was angry; it let out a long cry and dived to strike Genghis Khan's head.*

Ouyang Feng coldly said, "Arrive early compete early, arrive late compete late. Old Beggar, tell me, our contest today, is it just to decide victory or defeat, or is it for our lives?"

"To achieve victory sometimes means risking our lives," Hong Qigong said, "When we start, you don't need to be lenient."

"Good!" Ouyang Feng said. His left hand was behind his back, but suddenly he moved it forward, showing a snake staff. Tapping the staff's end to a rock he asked, "Here, or do you need a more open space?"

Hong Qigong has not opened his mouth when Huang Rong interrupted, "Mount Hua is not a good place to compete, we'd better go to find a boat."

Hong Qigong was puzzled, "What?"

"To give Mr. Ouyang another good opportunity to reply kindness with evil, to make a sneak attack from behind again," Huang Rong explained.

Hong Qigong burst out in laughter, "Fall into a trap once, learn to be smart once; don't expect the Old Beggar to show mercy anymore."

Listening to Huang Rong's insult Ouyang Feng's face did not show any emotion. He bent his knees a little bit, moved his staff to his right hand, and launched the Toad Stance with his left hand.

Huang Rong gave the dog-beating stick in her hand to Hong Qigong, "Shifu, use the Dog Beating Stick Technique and the Nine Yin Manual's martial arts. We don't talk about honor and honesty with an old traitor like him."

Hong Qigong thought, "It really is not easy to win relying on my own martial arts alone; if I spend too much energy fighting the Old Poison, I won't be able to fight the Old Heretic Huang later on." So he nodded his head and took the dog-beating stick. Immediately his left hand launched 'da cao jing she' [beating the grass scaring the snake], while his right hand launched 'bo cao xun she' [brushing the grass aside looking for snakes]; attacking from both sides.

Ouyang Feng had fought him several times yet he had never seen Hong Qigong use the Dog Beating Stick Technique. Even in a critical situation when they were fighting on the burning boat Hong Qigong did not use this technique. Ouyang Feng had seen Huang Rong use this technique before and he did not dare to look down on the technique; now that the stick was in Hong Qigong's hand it moved fast, carrying gusts of wind, truly not something to be trifled with. The snake staff in his hand shook; parried the left and evaded the right, he struck toward the middle.

He had lost his snake staff twice; the one currently in his hand was a new one. The staff had the same scary head carved on it, but the two venomous snakes wrapped around it were new; even though their poison was as lethal as the previous ones, but they haven't been used too long; thus their effectiveness was inferior to the previous ones.

In the past Hong Qigong had been bitten by this kind of venomous snake, he had also suffered under Ouyang Feng's vicious palms to the point of almost losing his life; which took him nearly two years to recover and get his martial art



skill back. That was his greatest defeat and greatest danger he had to face his entire life; how could he not avenge this enmity? Thus he moved his stick with all his might, attacking furiously.

The first time those two fought was over the Nine Yin Manual during the Sword Meet of Mount Hua. The second time was on the Peach Blossom Island, fighting over Guo Jing and Ouyang Ke's marriage proposal; this fight was to decide victory and defeat only, not a life-and-death situation. The third time was on the small boat in the middle of the sea; where life and death were separated only by a thin line, but Hong Qigong still held his uprightness. This fight was the fourth time they battled each other fiercely; each one threw everything they had, no more mercy. They both knew that the opponent had trained hard and improved their martial art skill throughout all these years; their martial arts were very fierce, so if they were careless and yield even for half a stance, it would be difficult not to lose their own lives.

Two people turning around and hitting each other for about two hundred moves when suddenly the moon disappeared, the darkness came blanketing everything. It was the darkest hour of the night before dawn. Both were afraid the opponent would launch a sneak attack, so they were focusing their attention on defense and did not care much on offense. Guo Jing and Huang Rong were anxious about their master's safety; each moved forward several steps, ready to help if Hong Qigong's life were threatened.

While watching intently on the fierce battle in front of his eyes, Guo Jing had a disquieting thought, "These two people are the top skilled martial artists, but one is heroically upholding justice, while the other one is deceitfully wicked. Obviously martial art in itself does not differentiate good from evil; it all comes back to the person using it. If used to

do good deeds, then the higher the skill the better, but if it used to do evil deeds, then the higher the skill the more wicked the martial art becomes.”

The darkness made the battle difficult to watch, but the weapons made loud clashing sound and strong gusts of wind; Guo Jing’s heart was beating faster. “Shifu has wasted two years worth of training because of his injury. Originally they were in par with each other; this time the outcome will be decided by a step forward or backward; I am afraid Ouyang Feng will gain a half-step advantage because of that. If I knew this would happen I wouldn’t have shown mercy to him three times,” he silently mused.

Guo Jing remembered Qiu Chuji once explained the ‘xin yi’ [trust and honor], that big trust and big honor should be differentiated from small trust and small honor. If a person’s entire being lacking trust and honor, it was the same as if that person did not have any trust and honor at all. Thinking about this, he felt his blood rushing through his system, he thought, “Although Shifu and Ouyang Feng clearly said that the battle will be a one-to-one combat, but what if Ouyang Feng harmed Shifu? What if from this time on, he would run amuck in the world? I don’t know how many good people will be hurt in his hands. I wasn’t clear about truth and righteousness before, hence I committed not a few foolishnesses.” Because of this thought he lifted up his palms, ready to move forward to help his master.

But suddenly he heard Huang Rong called out, “Ouyang Feng, you and my Jing Gege had made an agreement which resulted in you being spared from death three times; who would have thought that you still relying on your strength bullying me? You proved yourself untrustworthy, much like a nameless pawn of the Wulin; yet you are still dreaming of becoming the number one martial artist of the world?”

Ouyang Feng had committed countless ruthless acts in his life, but he was a proud man, he would call 'one' as 'one', and 'two' as 'two'; never backed off on his own words. If it was not because of his desire to learn the Nine Yin Manual he wouldn't break his promise to Guo Jing. This time he was fighting a fierce battle with Hong Qigong and suddenly Huang Rong brought it up; his ears turned red and his mind was muddled; he lost his concentration and the dog beating stick almost hit him.

"You are known as the Western Poison," Huang Rong continued, "So all kinds of evil are not stranger to you; but to have a junior sparing your life three times? You have lost your face. Where is your honor? How could you swallow your own words toward a junior? You have become the laughingstock of all the valiant people of the Jianghu till their mouths crooked. Ouyang Feng! Oh, Ouyang Feng! There is one title you deserve to have: you are the number one shameless man of the world!"

Ouyang Feng was angry, but he realized it was Huang Rong's clever trick to break his concentration; to make him feel ashamed. And as long as his internal strength was affected he would fall under Hong Qigong's hands, hence he turned a deaf ear toward Huang Rong. Who would have thought that Huang Rong kept accusing him with more and more evil and wicked deeds; sounded like every crime ever committed in the martial art world was his doing. If it was just ruthless deeds, Ouyang Feng did not care, but Huang Rong's tongue was getting more and more vicious. She mentioned all kinds of lowly and cowardice acts that even a bandit in the Jianghu would not do. Furthermore she said Ouyang Feng kissed Lingzhi Shangren's rear end; that he respectfully called Sha Tongtian his 'beloved uncle'; that he regarded Peng Lianhu as his 'honorable father' and begging for the secret ingredient of the poison Peng was

using; that he repeatedly asked Wanyan Honglie for the captain of the guards position, so that he could live at the Zhao palace and be their night watch. She went as far as how Guo Jing in the west had spared his life three times, how Guo Jing rescued him from the sand, but Huang Rong add some spices to her story, made Ouyang Feng appear completely helpless and the rescue ten times more dramatic.

At first Ouyang Feng was still able to control his emotion, but as the story progressed to extreme nonsense he could not restrain from refuting Huang Rong several times. It was exactly what Huang Rong wanted: to engage him in useless debate and deliberately losing his fighting concentration. Thus Ouyang Feng had to fight in two fronts: with his hands and feet he fiercely battled Hong Qigong, with his mouth he argued with Huang Rong. Unfortunately for him, Huang Rong's mouth was a lot sharper than Hong Qigong's hands and feet.

After fighting for half a day Ouyang Feng began to feel the pressure, he thought, "It would be difficult to win if I don't use the martial art from the Nine Yin Manual." Although he had not mastered Huang Rong's explanation on reversing the blood flow through vital energy passages, he had been able to train for half a year; due to his own intelligent and profound martial art, he managed to somewhat improve his internal strength. Therefore, his snake staff suddenly made strange movements.

Hong Qigong was startled; he had to increase his attention. Huang Rong called out, "Yuan si ying er, ba ba xi luo zhao, xue liu wen bing." Ouyang Feng was startled, "What is the meaning of that?" he asked himself. How would he know that Huang Rong was letting her tongue loose and talk whatever came into her mind? That it did not carry any meaning at all? Huang Rong repeatedly talked gibberish,

changing the tone of her voice; sometimes sounded like she was scolding him, other time encouraging, but suddenly turned to a sigh; then the sigh turned into cheers. Some sentences sounded like they were questions; or urgently asking for advice. Ouyang Feng had determined to ignore her, but in the end his curiosity won, "What are you talking about?"

Huang Rong answered him using Sanskrit sentences she learned. Ouyang Feng was confused; he tried hard to remember the altered manual Guo Jing wrote for him. Suddenly a flood of chaotic sounds, images, strategic moves and martial arts theories came streaming into his mind. He felt dizzy and suffer a momentary memory loss.

Hong Qigong saw an opening in Ouyang Feng's staff movement, "Got you!" he cried, and swung his stick toward the top of Ouyang Feng's head.

This hit did not carry tremendous strength; Ouyang Feng was already confused, but after his head was hit he became more confused. He was in a daze; screamed and dragging along his snake staff he ran away.

"Where are you running to?" Guo Jing called out. He jumped to catch up. Ouyang Feng leaped high, made three somersaults in the air; then rolling and crawling, climbing a hill nearby, he disappeared without a trace.

Hong Qigong, Guo Jing and Huang Rong looked at each other, perplexed; then they smiled out of surprise. Hong Qigong sighed, "Rong'er, your part in my victory over the Old Poison today is actually big. But with us, master and disciple, against one opponent, it was a rather shallow victory."

Huang Rong smiled, "Shifu, it was you who taught me this skill."

Hong Qigong laughed, "It was your natural ability," he said, "Only a crafty old fellow as your father can have a crafty daughter like you."

Suddenly someone called out from behind the mountain, "Good! You talk about other people behind their backs. Old Beggar, aren't you ashamed?"

"Father!" Huang Rong called and leaped to him.

It was dawn, the morning light shone on a man wearing a green robe, walking leisurely. It was none other than the Master of the Peach Blossom Island, Huang Yaoshi.

Huang Rong threw herself into her father's bosom; father and daughter hugged each other. Huang Yaoshi could see the childish expression had gone from his daughter's face; she had grown into a beautiful young woman. She looked much like his late wife, that his heart was both happy and sad at the same time.

"Old Heretic Huang," Hong Qigong said, "Didn't I tell you on the Peach Blossom Island that your virgin daughter is so smart? She is so crafty; others won't bully her that easily, so there is nothing for you to worry. Now tell me, was the Old Beggar wrong?"

Huang Yaoshi smiled faintly, holding his daughter's hand he went near and said, "Congratulations! You made the Old Poison ran away. His defeat means you and I have one less problem to face."

"You and I are the current experts of the world," Hong Qigong said, "As soon as I saw your daughter the worms in my tummy started to dance around, my mouth watered. Let us just compete and get it over with; you become the number one is fine with me, I become the number one is also good. I only want to eat Rong'er's cooked meals."

“Not so fast,” Huang Rong laughed, “Only if you lose I will cook something for you to eat.”

“Bah!” Hong Qigong spat, “You are shameless. You are extorting me, aren’t you?”

“Old Beggar,” Huang Yaoshi said, “You have wasted two full years to recover from your injuries. I am afraid you are not my match. Rong’er, no matter who wins and who loses, you will cook some food for your Shifu to eat.”

“Right!” Hong Qigong exclaimed, “Now THAT is a speech befitting a great master of a martial art school! How can the Master of the Peach Blossom Island have the same petty thought as a little girl? We don’t have to wait until noon to start our competition. Come!” He swung his bamboo stick and moved forward to begin.

Huang Yaoshi shook his head, “You have just fought the Old Poison for quite a while. Although your energy is not completely depleted, you are tired nonetheless. How can Old Huang gain a slight advantage over you? We will wait till noon to compete, you need to restore your strength.”

Even though Hong Qigong knew what he said was right, but he was too impatient to wait, so he insisted on starting right away. Huang Yaoshi simply sat on a big rock, totally ignoring him.

Seeing these two could not reach any agreement Huang Rong said, “Father, Shifu, I have an idea: the two of you can compete immediately without Father taking any advantage over Shifu.”

“Good! What is it?” Hong Qigong and Huang Yaoshi asked.

“The two of you have been friends for many-many years, no matter who wins or loses; your friendship will be damaged.

But today is the Sword Meet of Mount Hua, so no matter what, victory and defeat must be decided, does it not?"

Hong and Huang two people's interests were piqued. They were aware that she was right; and if she indeed had an excellent idea, then they would kill three birds with one stone: one, they could compete immediately; two, Huang Yaoshi would not take any advantage over Hong Qigong; three, their friendship would not be damaged. So they enthusiastically asked, "Tell us your great idea."

"My idea is this," Huang Rong explained, "First, Father compete with Jing Gege. We will see how many stances Father will need to defeat him. Then Shifu will also compete with Jing Gege. If Father uses 99 moves to score victory but Shifu needs 100 moves, then Father wins. But if Shifu only need 98 moves, then Shifu wins."

"Wonderful! Wonderful!" Hong Qigong exclaimed.

Huang Rong continued, "Jing Gege will compete with Father first; both are still fresh. Then when he competes with Shifu, both parties have each fought one time. Don't you say it is a fair deal?"

Huang Yaoshi nodded his head, "This is a good idea. Jing'er, come! Are you going to use weapon or not?"

"I am not going to," Guo Jing said. He was about to step forward when Huang Rong said again, "Hold on a second. There is one more thing I want to say: What if you two seniors cannot defeat Jing Gege in 300 moves?"

Hong Qigong burst out in laughter, "Old Heretic Huang, originally I envy you of having a smart daughter, who is always looking after her Father's well-being. Ay! Who would have thought that a girl is always a girl; born to leave home.



Actually she wanted this dumb kid to hold the title 'Number One Martial Artist in the World'!"

Huang Yaoshi might be eccentric, but he loved his daughter with all his heart. He secretly thought, "Let me help her achieve her wish." So he said, "What Rong'er had said is true. If we two old men cannot defeat Jing'er in 300 moves, would we have any face to become the Number One?" But suddenly he had another thought, "I intended to hold back and let him to fight me for 300 stances, but what if the Old Beggar does not hold back and score victory in less than 300 moves? Then I won't be holding back for Jing'er's sake, but for the Old Beggar's." He hesitated on what to do.

Hong Qigong shoved Guo Jing forward, "Go, fight! What are you waiting for?" he said.

Guo Jing staggered and stepped forward to face Huang Yaoshi. "All right," Huang Yaoshi thought, "Let me try his skill first, then I'll decide what to do later." Raising his left palm he hacked diagonally toward Guo Jing's neck. "First move!" he called out.

While Huang Yaoshi was not sure what to do, Guo Jing also had some doubt of his own, "There is no way I can win the world's number one title; but shall I let Daozhu [Island Master] win, or shall I let Shifu win?" He was still thinking when Huang Yaoshi had made his move. Guo Jing lifted up his right hand to parry. His body shook and he almost fell down. "Stupid!" he scolded himself, "Why would I worry about whom I should let to win? Even if I fight with all my might I may not be able to keep up for 300 stances."

In the mean time Huang Yaoshi had launched the second move, so he was forced to focus his attention. He made a decision right then and there, to compete with those two people with all his might. Who is swift and who is slow, let

them use their skill to defeat him. He would not be one sided.

Several stances later Huang Yaoshi was astonished. "How did this dumb kid reach this level? If I held back, not only I might not be able to defeat him in 300 stances, I might even lose in his hands." In a battle between martial art experts one cannot let back even half a step. Because initially Huang Yaoshi was only using 70% of his strength, he fell under Guo Jing's control. He started to feel alarmed, and busily launched the 'luo ying shen jian zhang' [falling flower divine sword palm technique], his body floating around at full strength. But Guo Jing now was not the same as Guo Jing then. Huang Yaoshi had used dozens different palm techniques, yet it was still difficult for him to gain an upper hand.

After about one hundred moves Huang Yaoshi suddenly launched a trick move. Guo Jing did not expect him to make such move; he was almost kicked down by Huang Yaoshi's left leg. Frantically Guo Jing retreated two steps and steadied himself. Because of this Huang Yaoshi managed to even up the battle situation.

Huang Yaoshi took that opportunity to take a deep breath. "Amazing!" he secretly praised.

Huang Yaoshi worked very hard to gain an upper hand, but unexpectedly Guo Jing's position was very firm. Guo Jing had decided all along to put up a very tight defense line; he knew it was impossible for him to win, so he only hoped he would not lose.

Listening to his daughter on the side counting, "Two-hundred and three, two-hundred and four," Huang Yaoshi became impatient. "Old Beggar may use a heavy hand; if he defeats Jing'er in 100 moves, where would I put my face

at?" he silently thought. He changed his attacks: now his palms floating around like a shadow; his hands were very swift.

Guo Jing started to feel the pressure; his chest tightened, like it was pressed under a huge mountain. He started to get disoriented, but he bravely stood his ground.

Huang Yaoshi's hands moved faster and faster, his offensive power increased. In the meantime Huang Rong's mouth was also counting faster and faster.

Guo Jing started to feel his lips and tongue dry up, his movements became sluggish; getting more and more difficult. The only thing kept him going was his strong will. In this critical moment suddenly he heard Huang Rong call out, "Three hundred!"

Huang Yaoshi's countenance changed, he leaped back.

Guo Jing, on the other hand, still felt dizzy. His body did not stop spinning; he turned around more than a dozen times. He knew he was going to fall, hence he focused his energy to his left leg with 'qian jin zhui' [thousand-catty plummet], trying to anchor his body down. But Huang Yaoshi power was incredible; even after he pulled back his hands, the force did not vanish away. Guo Jing lost his balance and fell down; but he used his right hand to push himself back up again. Immediately he launched dozens of stances from the '18-Dragon Subduing Palms' and thus cleared his mind up. He stayed silent for a moment, then turned his head toward Huang Yaoshi and said, "Huang Daozhu, several moves more and I will fall down to the ground."

Seeing Guo Jing was unexpectedly able to withstand his more than ten years worth of 'qi men wu zhuan' [wonderful gate five revolutions] cultivation, Huang Yaoshi was not angry; on the contrary, he was happy. "Old Beggar," he said,

"I am useless, the title Number One in the World is yours." He cupped his fists and turned around to leave.

"Not too fast! Not too fast!" Hong Qigong said, "I won't necessarily win. Could you lend your iron flute to Jing'er, please?"

Huang Yaoshi's jade flute was already broken, so he wielded an iron flute on his waist instead. He pulled the flute and gave it to Guo Jing.

Hong Qigong turned to Guo Jing and said, "You use a weapon. I will fight you barehanded."

Guo Jing was dumbstruck, "This ..."

Hong Qigong said, "Your bare hand techniques came from me. If you use your hands and feet, how can we call it competition? Come!" His left hand's fingers forming a hook, showing off his grabbing skill, trying to snatch the iron flute in Guo Jing's hand. Guo Jing did not understand his intention; he let the flute go without any resistance.

"Dumb kid!" Hong Qigong scolded, "We are competing martial arts skill!" With his left hand he gave the flute back to Guo Jing, while with his right hand he tried to snatch it one more time. This time Guo Jing moved his flute to evade the attack. Huang Rong started counting, "First move!"

In the battle between experts, using weapon or being barehanded did not make too much difference. Hong Qigong used his '18-Dragon Subduing Palms' attacking ferociously; the gust of wind could be felt a 'zhang' [10 feet/3 meters] away. Even with the iron flute in his hand, how could Guo Jing get close to him? Moreover, Guo Jing was not used to use weapon until in the western region he was forced to battle Ouyang Feng on the stone cliff. It was then that he started improving his sword technique. Even

then he did not put too much emphasis on the offense; his swordsmanship was 80% for defense, and only 20% for offense.

The weapon techniques he learned from the Six Freaks of Jiangnan were inadequate to battle an expert; it was after he learned the Nine Yin Manual that his weapon technique improved greatly. Actually it was inside that stone building in the west he started learning many defensive techniques in using a sword to defend against Ouyang Feng's snake staff. This time he was using an iron flute as a sword to ward off Hong Qigong's fierce palm attacks; and he was able to defend himself quite well.

Hong Qigong could see his strong defense line and was delighted, he thought, "This kid made a tremendous advancement; I did not teach him in vain. But it won't look good for the Old Heretic Huang if I defeat him in under 200 moves. I'd better wait until after 200 moves then I am going to increase my power." And so Hong Qigong kept using his '18-Dragon Subduing Palms', from the first variation to the ninth; with gusts of wind so strong surrounded Guo Jing completely.

This was where Hong Qigong made a mistake. Guo Jing's weapon skill had not reached perfection yet; if he kept pressing Guo Jing with a heavy hand, Guo Jing would not be able to withstand, but he wanted to wait until after the 200<sup>th</sup> move. Initially Guo Jing's strength was already profound; after completed the 'yi jin duan gu pian' [changing muscle forging bone chapter], his internal strength increased by leaps and bounds. On the other hand, Hong Qigong had advanced in age, plus he had suffered a heavy injury under Ouyang Feng's snake staff. It was true that he had completely recovered, but his stamina could not compete with Guo Jing's in an endurance race. To make

matter worse for him, the '18-Dragon Subduing Palms' required a lot of energy; so after 9 rounds (or 162 stances) even if his attacks were still strong and fierce, but his stamina was gradually decreasing.

After about 200 moves not only the iron flute in Guo Jing's right hand increased in offensive power, but he was actually getting better in coordinating the right sword technique with his left hand palm technique. Hong Qigong was secretly groaning; realizing that he would not win relying on his brute force, he had to use strategy to defeat this dumb kid, so immediately he changed the way he fought. He opened his hands wide.

Guo Jing was startled, "Shifu has not taught me this stance yet," he thought. If it was a fight against an enemy, he would attack toward the chest since it was wide open, but the opponent he faced was his own benevolent master, how could he use a killer strike?

While he hesitated, Hong Qigong smiled and said, "You are tricked!" His left foot swiftly moved upward to knock the iron flute in Guo Jing's hand down, while his right palm slanting downward, attacking Guo Jing's shoulder. He only used 80% of his strength on this attack since he did not have any intention to hurt Guo Jing. He only wanted to knock Guo Jing down, and thus achieved victory.

Who would have thought that these past several years Guo Jing had endured wind and frost; his body became resilient. This heavy blow made him stagger and caused him to suffer a severe pain, but he did not fall down.

Hong Qigong was surprised Guo Jing was able to withstand his palm, he busily said, "Quickly spit three times and breathe in, breathe out; see if you suffer an internal injury."

Guo Jing followed his advice, and his chest was not constricted, anymore so he said, "Disciple has lost."

"No," Hong Qigong said, "We have to keep fighting. If you admit defeat, the Old Heretic Huang won't accept it. Come!" Immediately he sent his palm to attack.

Guo Jing did not have any weapon in his hand anymore, while the incoming attack was fierce, so he used Zhou Botong's Vacant Fist to parry the attack.

The Vacant Fist technique was the softest fist technique in the world; it was created by Zhou Botong based on the Taoist principles found in the 'Dao De Jing' [moral/virtue scripture - Taoist's holy scripture]. The 'Dao De Jing' said, 'A strong army can be decimated; a strong tree can be broken. Strength will fail; suppleness will prevail.' Also, "The most flexible substance under the sky is water, but it is not easy to withstand its strong attack. Suppleness' victory is powerful; softness' victory is strong. No one in the world is unaware, no one can stand.'

On the other hand, '18-Dragon Subduing Palms' technique was the strongest/hardest martial art. There was a saying, 'Softness can overcome hardness.' However, if it was Hong Qigong's level of 'hardness,' then it would not be easy for Zhou Botong's 'softness' to overcome. Fortunately, Guo Jing had mastered the mutual hands combat technique, so with his right hand he launch the soft Vacant Fist, while with his left he employed the Dragon Subduing Palm; hard and soft worked together, yin and yang complemented each other. No matter how fierce Hong Qigong's attack was, he could not penetrate Guo Jing's defense.

On the side Huang Rong kept counting; it was almost 300 stances, and Guo Jing did not show any sign that he would be defeated soon. One move after another ... Hong Qigong

heard her calling out the number two hundred and ninety-nine; he became edgy, wanted to win the contest; so for the last move he launched the 'Proud Dragon Repents' full-strength, with earth-shattering power to back it up. But once it was launched, he began to feel regret; afraid that Guo Jing would not be able to withstand and suffer a heavy injury, so he shouted, "Watch out!"

Guo Jing understood his warning, but the gust of wind had already reached his face; he knew it was very strong. He also knew that his Vacant Fist wouldn't be able to parry this attack; so in this critical moment his right hand made a circle and with a loud shout launched the very same 'Proud Dragon Repents'.

Two palms collided with a deafening sound; both men felt their bodies shook violently. Huang Yaoshi and Huang Rong both cried out in shock, simultaneously they jumped toward the men, only to see both men stood still with their palms stuck together like they were glued to each other.

Guo Jing had a mind to yield, but knew very well that his master's overbearing power was still pushing his palm. If he let go and his master did not take his strength away, he might end up getting seriously injured. Hence he was forced to wait for his master to take the pressure away then he would admit defeat.

Seeing Guo Jing was able to block this palm, which he sent with his lifetime cultivation of energy, Hong Qigong could not help but feel pleasantly surprised. He regretted his proud thinking of wanting to be the number one; now he wanted his disciple to win this contest and build up a name for himself. Therefore, gradually he decreased his power to nothing.



Right when these two men were still in a stalemate position, where nobody wins or loses, suddenly someone was heard shouting three times from behind the cliff; then someone leaped and made three somersaults in the air before landing on the ground close to them; it was the Western Poison Ouyang Feng. Hong Qigong and Guo Jing simultaneously retracted their palms and leaped backward.

Ouyang Feng's clothes were tattered, his face full of blood, he shouted, "I have mastered the Nine Yin Manual! My martial art is number one in the world!" Lifting up his snake staff he swept away all four people.

Hong Qigong picked up his dog-beating stick and parried the snake staff. After a while all four people were astonished. Ouyang Feng's stances had always been unusual, but this time they were weirder than ever: he would suddenly claw his own face or kick his own buttock; while launching an attack he would suddenly change direction midway in an unpredictable way. Hong Qigong was extremely amazed; he put a strong defense with his dog-beating technique and did not dare to act carelessly.

While fighting ferociously, 'Slap! Slap! Slap!' suddenly Ouyang Feng slapped his own face red, then he shouted loudly; put down his hands and crawled around like an animal.

Hong Qigong was surprised, but also amused, he thought, "My stick technique is the best at beating dogs, you act like a dog, aren't you just coming straight for the trap?" Lifting up his bamboo stick he aimed for Ouyang Feng's waist. Unexpectedly Ouyang Feng rolled his body around and pinched the stick to the ground; then he rolled alongside the stick upward. Hong Qigong was so startled that his grab loosened and the bamboo stick fell down. Ouyang Feng suddenly leaped up and kicked both feet toward Hong

Qigong's head. Hong Qigong was taken by surprise and forced to step back in anxiety.

By this time Huang Rong had already bent down and picked the iron flute up, giving it to her father. Huang Yaoshi used that flute as a sword piercing toward Ouyang Feng. "Emperor Duan! I am not afraid of your 'Solitary Yang Finger'!" Ouyang Feng called out; he jumped and threw himself up.

Seeing his behavior like that, Huang Yaoshi knew that his mind was confused; but to Huang Yaoshi's amazement his attack was fiercer than before. Even though he was smart, Huang Yaoshi did not have any idea what had happened. He did not know that Ouyang Feng had diligently trained himself according to the altered manual Guo Jing wrote for him; and then Huang Rong led him along the wrong path by giving him random interpretation. Driven by his desire to win the competition he followed her instruction blindly and trained hard. Only his martial art was profound, so even though following the wrong path with lots of mistakes, he somehow managed to achieve some improvement and gave Hong and Huang, two men of great learning and integrity, a hard time.

Dozens of stances later Huang Yaoshi was forced to admit defeat. Guo Jing stepped forward to face the enemy. Ouyang Feng suddenly stopped and wept, "My son, you died a tragic death!" Throwing his snake staff aside he opened up his arms wide to hug Guo Jing.

Guo Jing knew he was remembering his nephew, Ouyang Ke. Ouyang Feng's voice sounded so miserable that Guo Jing felt sorry for him; but he was also scared, so he held out his hand to shove Ouyang Feng's arms away. But Ouyang Feng turned his left wrist over and grabbed Guo Jing's arm, while his right arm tightly hugged Guo Jing's

body. Guo Jing frantically struggled to free himself but Ouyang Feng was too strong for him; he could not get away from Ouyang Feng's embrace.

Hong Qigong and Huang Yaoshi, father and daughter, were shocked; they moved together to rescue Guo Jing. Hong Qigong stretched out his finger to attack the 'feng wei' [phoenix tail] acupoint on Ouyang Feng's shoulder, to force him loosen up his grip. Unexpectedly by that time Ouyang Feng's energy passages had been reversed, his acupoints were entirely dislodged, that although Hong Qigong's finger was right on target seemed like he did not even aware of the attack.

Huang Rong picked up a rock and smashed the top of Ouyang Feng's head. Ouyang Feng casually swung his right fist upward; Huang Rong was not able to hold the rock, it flew toward the valley below. But because of this interference Guo Jing was free from Ouyang Feng's right arm; he struggled hard and leaped backward. After calming down a moment he saw Ouyang Feng and Huang Yaoshi were engaged in a fierce battle.

Huang Yaoshi had inserted his flute back to his waist and fought barehanded. This time Ouyang Feng's movement was really bizarre, weird beyond imagination. Sometimes he stood upright, some other time he would lean to the side with body as straight as a stick, yet some other time his body was horizontally off the ground, supported with one hand while the other hand launched strange attacks. Huang Yaoshi had to put all his concentration to face this kind of opponent, since Ouyang Feng's movement was totally unpredictable.

Hong Qigong, Guo Jing and Huang Rong three people were watching intently with their hearts beating fast. Seeing her father's precarious condition, Huang Rong called out,

“Shifu, toward this lunatic we don’t have to follow Wulin’s rules, let us fight together!”

Hong Qigong shook his head, “If it were some other day, we can cooperate to capture him, but today is the Sword Meet of Mount Hua; the men of valor under the heaven must fight one on one. If we relied on numbers we will be disgraced by the heroes of Jianghu.” But he also could see that Ouyang Feng’s mental condition was so severe; his mouth foaming, spitting his saliva everywhere. Huang Yaoshi had a difficult time avoiding this attack and was forced to step back.

A moment later Ouyang Feng stooped down, seemingly in pain; his back was completely undefended. Huang Yaoshi was delighted, he thought, “His madness is spreading after all.” With the ‘Divine Flicking Finger’ he attacked the ‘ying xiang’ [welcoming fragrance] acupoint on the side of Ouyang Feng’s nose. This finger attack was executed swiftly but unexpectedly as soon as it touched his face, Ouyang Feng slightly turned his head and bit Huang Yaoshi’s index finger.

Huang Yaoshi was so startled and quickly hit the ‘tai yang’ [sun] acupoint with his left hand; forcing the mouth to loosen up. Ouyang Feng thrust his right hand up while his mouth bit even harder.

Guo Jing and Huang Rong simultaneously attacked from both sides. Ouyang Feng was forced to loosen up his bit on Huang Yaoshi’s finger, but his ten fingers forming two claws tried to grab Huang Rong’s face. Under the bright sunlight his face looked so nauseatingly fierce and full of blood. Huang Rong was so scared that she ran away screaming.

Guo Jing hurriedly came to her rescue; Ouyang Feng was forced to parry this palm attack toward his back, giving

Huang Rong an opportunity to escape.

Only about a dozen of so stances later Guo Jing's shoulder and leg were hit one after another. "Jing'er, back off! Let me try," Hong Qigong shouted, rushed ahead barehanded. Two people were engaged in a fierce battle for the second time in one day, this time more ferocious than the last.

Hong Qigong had been paying close attention when Ouyang Feng battled Huang Yaoshi and Guo Jing. He found out that even though Ouyang Feng's movements were strange, he could see a pattern on them; they were actually based on the 'Toad Stance' launched backward, like upward movement became downward, left became right. Although his comprehension was incomplete, but Hong Qigong thought that with 70, 80% certainty he had a general idea on how to battle him. He proceeded with utmost caution, and was able to launch a counterattack for roughly every three attacks he received.

Huang Rong took out her handkerchief and wrapped her father's wound. Huang Yaoshi turned his attention to the ongoing battle and after watching a moment he started to shout one after another, "Qi Xiong, kick him upside down." "Strike his 'ju que' [gigantic capital]!" "Hack his 'tian zhu' [pillar of heaven] with the back of your hand."

As a spectator Huang Yaoshi could see clearly; Hong Qigong followed his instructions and a short while later was able to gain a slight advantage over his opponent. But actually these two people were ashamed of what they were doing, they thought, "This time the Eastern Heretic and the Northern Beggar two people join forces to battle the Western Poison, one person." Seeing his defeat is imminent, suddenly Ouyang Feng opened up his mouth and spat his saliva toward Hong Qigong's face.

Hong Qigong quickly leaned sideways to evade, but unexpectedly Ouyang Feng had already anticipated his move. Ouyang Feng's palm flew and slapped the side of Hong Qigong's head; while simultaneously spat saliva toward his face. Hong Qigong was in an awkward position; he did not have any chance to evade. If he let the spittle hit his eyeball he knew he would suffer an injury, or at least very hurt; and if the opponent used that opportunity to attack it would be very difficult for him to parry. He did not have any choice but extending his right hand and took the spittle with his palm, while his left hand counterattacked.

Several stances later Ouyang Feng again spat his saliva; looked like he was using his spittle as secret projectile to confuse enemy's defense. Hong Qigong felt icky and angry at the same time. He still had the spittle on his right palm; he was not able to shake it loose or wipe it on his clothes since he had to focus his entire concentration to fight the enemy. With a sudden movement he stretched his right palm and shouted, "Got you!" He smeared his right palm on Ouyang Feng's face. Looked like he was casually smearing the spittle on Ouyang Feng's face, but in actuality his palm carried a murderous intention.

Even though Ouyang Feng's mind was confused his senses were as keen as before. Seeing Hong Qigong's palm was about to wipe his face he leaned sideways slightly, evading the attack. Hong Qigong flipped his palm and moved vertically up. Ouyang Feng turned his head slightly and opened his mouth to bite. It was exactly the same bite that defeated Huang Yaoshi's unique skill. It looked ridiculous, but since his movement was so quick that even somebody who had reached martial art perfection like Huang Yaoshi was not able to evade.

Huang Yaoshi, Huang Rong and Guo Jing could see clearly Hong Qigong's palm went straight into Ouyang Feng's

mouth; and within an inch from the target suddenly the mouth opened showing two rows of white teeth gleaming under the bright sunlight; ready to bite Hong Qigong's finger. They could not refrain from shouting in alarm, "Watch out!"

What these three people, along with Ouyang Feng, forgot was that Hong Qigong was widely known as the 'jiu zhi shen gai' [Nine-fingered Divine Beggar]. One time because of his gluttonous character he was late in saving the life of a Jianghu's man of valor. In his regret and anger toward himself he chopped off his right index finger.

Ouyang Feng's bite was swift and accurate, if it were other people he would certainly succeed in biting other's finger; but because Hong Qigong did not have an index finger 'clack!' his teeth were biting air.

Actually Ouyang Feng, and everybody else for that matter, knew that Hong Qigong only had nine fingers; but in a ferocious battle situation like this, who would have time to remember little detail like that? The battle between experts, where both contenders' martial arts have been refined through fire, more often than not the end result would be decided by slight oversight like this. When Ouyang Feng bit an empty space, how could Hong Qigong let this opportunity pass? With the 'xiao kou ya ya' [the laughter of a mute] immediately his middle finger struck the 'di cang' [earthen storehouse] acupoint on the side of Ouyang Feng's mouth.

Seeing Hong Qigong's attack went well, the three spectators were ready to applaud, but their mouths were just saying the word 'good' when suddenly Hong Qigong somersaulted several times backward; while Ouyang Feng staggered backward like a drunk before finally came to a stop and let out a big laugh.

Turned out the energy passages in his body were reversed, so that when Hong Qigong hit his major acupoint of 'zu yang ming wei jing' [lit. positive foot, bright stomach passage] he only experienced a slight numbness, then immediately back to normal. Taking that opportunity his palm hit Hong Qigong's shoulder. Lucky for him, because his finger was stretched out, he did not get hit too severely. Hong Qigong further neutralized the hit by somersaulting backward while launching the 'jian long zai tian' [seeing dragon on the field], which made Ouyang Feng stagger back.

Hong Qigong avoided serious injury by moving fast, yet his body was sore, temporarily unable to move. Hong Qigong was the grand master of his respective martial art school; even if he did not want to admit defeat to a confused man, yet he had to admit that the opponent's martial art was admirable. He cupped his fists and said, "Ouyang Xiong, the Old Beggar admits defeat, you are the Number One Martial Artist in the World!"

Ouyang Feng looked up to the sky and let out a long laugh, his arms waving chaotically in the air. He turned toward Huang Yaoshi and asked, "Emperor Duan, do you or do you not admit defeat?"

Huang Yaoshi was not happy, he thought, "The Number One Martial Artist in The World title fell to a lunatic; won't the Old Beggar and I become the laughingstock of the heroes of the world?" But he realized that even if he'd fight again, it would be difficult for him to score victory anyway, so he did not have any choice but nod his agreement.

Ouyang Feng turned to Guo Jing and said, "Son, your father's martial art is matchless, unrivalled in the world, aren't you happy?"



Ouyang Ke was officially his nephew, but actually he was his son; they were known as uncle and nephew but actually they were father and son. In his confused mind he saw Guo Jing as Ouyang Ke, and thus revealing the secret he had kept for decades.

Guo Jing thought no one present was able to defeat him, so he was worthy of the title Number One Martial Artist in the World; "We can't defeat you!" he said.

Ouyang Feng giggled foolishly, he turned toward Huang Rong and said, "Good daughter-in-law, aren't you happy?"

Huang Rong saw her father, her master and Guo Jing were defeated one after another; she had been thinking of a way to cope with this lunatic early on, but could not think of anything good. Now Ouyang Feng was asking her, she saw he was dancing joyfully with a strange facial expression. Under the bright sunlight his shadow was also dancing back and forth in confusion; suddenly an idea came into her mind, "Who said you are number one in the world?" she asked, "There is one person you can't defeat for sure."

Ouyang Feng was very angry, he beat his chest and roared, "Who? Who? Let him come here and fight me!"

"This man's martial art is so high, you are not his match," Huang Rong said.

"Who? Who? Let him come here and fight me!" Ouyang Feng said.

"He is called Ouyang Feng," Huang Rong said.

Ouyang Feng scratched his head, musing, "Ouyang Feng?"

Huang Rong continued, "Right! Your martial art may be high, but you won't stand against Ouyang Feng."

Ouyang Feng's mind was totally confused; he knew the name 'Ouyang Feng' to have a very close relationship with himself, but who could that be? "Who am I?" he asked nobody in particular.

"You are you," Huang Rong sneered, "You don't know who you are, why do you ask me?"

Ouyang Feng's heart turned cold, he leaned his head sideways, trying to think hard; but his brain did not want to cooperate, he could not figure out who he was, he could not understand anything.

He was an intelligent man; oftentimes when he was alone he liked to ponder the old-age philosophical questions like, "Who am I? What am I during my lifetime? What will I become after I die?" Ouyang Feng was a smart person, his comprehension ability was outstanding; these questions sometimes came flashing in his mind. That particular day he had defeated three great martial artists but his energy passages were reversed; he would be happy but suddenly turn angry. Listening to Huang Rong he looked around in confusion and muttered, "I, who am I? Where am I? What happened to me?"

"Ouyang Feng wanted to fight you, he wanted to snatch the Nine Yin Manual away from you!" Huang Rong said.

"Where is he?" Ouyang Feng asked

Huang Rong pointed toward his own shadow and said, "Look! He is behind you!"

Ouyang Feng quickly turned around and saw his own shadow. He was shocked. "This ... this ... he ... he ..."

"He is going to beat you!" Huang Rong said.

Ouyang Feng squatted and hacked the shadow. The shadow also squatted and hacked him.

Ouyang Feng was scared, he hacked and he chopped left and right, but the shadow also moving incessantly. Ouyang Feng felt his opponent was so fierce, he turned around to evade. Facing the sunlight he did not see his shadow anymore "Where did you run?" he shouted, and ran toward the left.

Their left side was actually a barren rock wall. The sun was behind him, casting a shadow on the wall. It looked like the enemy was standing straight in front of him. Ouyang Feng sent out his right palm, striking the wall with all his might. He felt a shot of pain straight to his bone. "Very fierce!" he shouted. Immediately he sent a left kick toward the wall, and the shadow also sent him a kick. His foot hit the wall, hard. The pain was unbearable. Ouyang Feng did not dare to fight again; he turned around and ran away.

This time he was running toward the sun, the enemy disappeared. Several 'zhang's later he turned around to look, and to his surprise the enemy was right behind him. He was frightened and shouted loudly, "You can be the world's number one, I admit defeat." But the shadow was motionless.

Ouyang Feng turned around and ran again, but as soon as he turned his head he saw the shadow was closely following him. He could not run, he could not fight, his heart was stricken with terror; screaming and cursing he ran toward the valley below. A moment later his voice could still be heard from the other side of the hill, "Don't chase me, don't chase me!"

Seeing a great grand master of martial art of their generation ended up this way Huang Yaoshi and Hong

Qigong looked at each other and heaved a deep sigh. By that time Ouyang Feng's cry was intermittent, it sounded like he was already several 'li's away. The mountains and valleys echoed his cry, which sounded like a wolf's howl or a ghost's cry. The four of them were standing under the bright sunlight, yet they felt coldness creep into their hearts.

Hong Qigong sighed, "This man won't live much longer."

All of a sudden Guo Jing mumbled, "I? Who am I?"

Huang Rong knew him to be honest and upright, she was afraid he might think over this matter too much and as a result being possessed by an evil spirit; quickly she said, "You are Guo Jing, Jing Gege. Quickly think about yourself, don't think too much about other matters."

Guo Jing shivered in cold, startled, and came to his senses, "Right! Shifu, Huang Daozhu, let us go down the mountain."

"Dumb kid!" Hong Qigong scolded him, "You are still calling him Huang Daozhu? I'm going to give you several slaps on your face."

Guo Jing was startled; he saw Huang Rong was blushing, looked like she was smiling, yet she was not. He knew what to do; bashfully he called, "Father-in-law!" his face was red.

Huang Yaoshi laughed a big laugh; he pulled his daughter's hand with one hand, then pulled Guo Jing's hand with the other, said to Hong Qigong, "Qi Xiong, martial art study is inexhaustible. Today we've seen the Old Poison's martial art, which made others frightened and ashamed at the same time. Ever since Chongyang Zhenren died, there is no more the Number One Martial Artist in the World."

“Rong’er’s culinary skill is number one in the world, this I can guarantee,” Hong Qigong said.

Huang Rong pursed up her lips and laughed, “No need to praise me, let us go down the mountain; I am going to prepare some good food for you to enjoy.”

Hong Qigong, Huang Yaoshi, Guo Jing and Huang Rong four people went down Mount Hua. Huang Rong demonstrated her superb culinary skill by handpicked the ingredients and cooked some out-of-this-world quality dishes. Hong Qigong ate to his heart’s content.

That very evening four people slept in an inn; Huang Yaoshi father and daughter shared a room, while Guo Jing and Hong Qigong shared another. Early the next morning Guo Jing awoke only to find the other bed empty; Hong Qigong was nowhere to be seen. On the table top he saw three letters written with grease: ‘I am gone’; it was unclear whether the letters were written with a chicken leg’s bone or a pork hoof.

Guo Jing quickly went to the other room to alert Huang Yaoshi father and daughter. Huang Yaoshi simply sighed and said, “Qi Xiong leads a busy life, he is like a divine dragon; we can see its head but not its tail.” He turned his gaze to Jing and Rong couple and said, “Jing’er, your parents have passed away, the closest relative to you would be your Da Shifu Ke Zhen’e. Why don’t you come along with us to the Peach Blossom Island and ask your Da Shifu to act in your parents’ behalf to preside at your wedding with Rong’er?”

Guo Jing was both grieved and joyful, he could not say anything but nodded his head repeatedly. Huang Rong pursed her lips and smiled; she wanted to scold him ‘Dumb’ but looking at her father she refrained from saying so.

Three people traveled together crossing mountains and rivers, heading southeast. In less than a day, they arrived in between the two parts of Zhejiang; the Peach Blossom Island was not too far ahead. Suddenly they heard an eagle's cry high up in the air; two white eagles were seen flying from the north. Guo Jing was delighted, he whistled and the pair of eagle dived down and perched on his shoulders.

When he left Mongolia Guo Jing was such in a hurry that he did not take his eagles along; but now that they met his joy was unspeakable. He held out his hands to stroke the eagles' back and then he saw a piece of leather rolled into a small cylinder tied on the male eagle's foot. Quickly he used his dagger to take the leather and found a letter carved on it. It was written in Mongolian characters and read, 'We are going south to attack Xiangyang, Knowing my lord's loyalty to his country I braved death to inform you. I have caused my lord's mother tragic death, am so ashamed I don't have the face to see you. I want to say goodbye, am going to the west to live with my eldest brother; won't come back to my homeland forever. I wish my lord's good fortune, long life and happiness.'

The letter did not bear any signature, but as soon as he saw it Guo Jing recognized Princess Huazheng's handwriting. He translated the letter for Huang Yaoshi father and daughter, and asked, "Father-in-law, what do you think?"

Huang Yaoshi answered, "This place is close to Lin'an, but if we inform the royal government they won't necessarily believe us; even if they did, it will take a long time for them to react. This is an urgent matter; your little red horse is swift. Leave for Xiangyang today. If the garrison commander is willing to cooperate, help him defend the city. If not, kill him and lead the troops and the people to fight

the Mongolians. Rong'er and I will wait for you on the Peach Blossom Island."

Guo Jing asserted his agreement, but Huang Rong's countenance changed. There was nobody who knows her heart better than her father, so Huang Yaoshi smiled and said, "Very well, Rong'er, you can go too. Come home as soon as you are done; if the government wants to reward you, don't take it."

Huang Rong was ecstatic, "That's for sure," she said.

The young couple took their leave from their father, riding the little red horse heading west. Guo Jing was afraid they would be late; if the Mongolians had already attacked the city, he knew the massacre would be unimaginable; therefore, they continued their journey almost nonstop.

One night they stopped by an inn to spend the night. They were already nearing the two southern roads which linked towards Jiangxi. Guo Jing's mind was occupied with Huazheng's letter; he recalled their childhood together, how he, Huazheng and Toulei played together in the desert. And then his mind wandered to things that happened since until today. His heart was depressed. Huang Rong saw he was staring blankly, lost in thought; she sat by the lamp sewing her clothes.

"Rong'er," suddenly Guo Jing broke the silence, "She said she had caused my mother's tragic death that she is ashamed to see me ever again; what did she mean by that?"

"Her father had forced your mother to her death; naturally she felt sorry for that," Huang Rong reasoned.

"Mmm," Guo Jing mumbled. Lowering his head he tried to recall the scene surrounding his mother's death. Suddenly he leaped up and slap the table, "I know! So that's how it

is!" Huang Rong was startled that the needle punctured the tip of her finger and a drop of blood came out. She smiled and asked, "What is it? You made a fuss about nothing; what did you know?"

Guo Jing said, "When my mother and I opened the Khan's secret order and decided to go back south there was nobody around, yet Khan immediately found out and captured us, mother and son. In the end my mother committed suicide and died. Who reported on us? I have been thinking hard about it. Turned out ... turned out it was she."

Huang Rong shook her head, "Princess Huazheng loved you very much; it is impossible for her to betray you."

"She did not mean to," Guo Jing explained, "She was outside, accidentally heard everything my mother and I said. She told her father so that Khan would prohibit us from going back home; who would have thought that it ended up in a great tragedy?" Saying thus he sighed and sighed again.

"Because she did that unwittingly, you must go to the west to find her," Huang Rong said.

Guo Jing disagreed, "I love her as my sister. She is now with her brother in the west; she has all the honor and riches she deserves; why would I go and seek her?"

Huang Rong smiled, secretly she was very happy.

Another day they arrived at the southern Jiangxi town of Shangrao; the horse trotted along the mountain road where the grass was tall. It was a desolate place. Ahead of them was a dark forest thick with trees. High above them the pair of eagles let out a loud angry cry, and then they dived down and in a blink of an eye disappeared into the



forest. Jing and Rong knew something was not right, quickly they urged their horse to run ahead.

Winding through the forest path they saw their eagles were spiraling down above a man who was trying to fight them frantically. They came closer and found out that the man was Peng Zhanglao [Elder Peng] from the Beggar Clan.

Peng Zhanglao was brandishing a steel saber trying to protect himself. The saber moved swiftly; although the eagles were brave it would be difficult for them to score victory. The female eagle made a sudden attack from behind and managed to snatch Elder Peng's head covering, showing a patch of baldness on his head. Peng Zhanglao's saber swept up, cutting down some of its feathers.

As soon as Huang Rong saw the baldness on Elder Peng's head she remembered something, "That day the eagle's breast was injured by a short arrow; turned out it was this evil beggar who did it. Afterwards the pair of eagle fought the criminal again by the 'qing long tan' [Green Dragon Shore] where they managed to snatch a piece of scalp; so it was this evil beggar."

"Surnamed Peng!" Huang Rong loudly called out, "Look who is here."

Peng Zhanglao lifted up his eye to see two people, he was scared out of his wits; he turned around and ran away. The male eagle dived down and struck the top of his head. Peng Zhanglao swung his saber to protect his head. The female eagle swooped from the side and pecked his left eye. Peng Zhanglao screamed, throwing his saber away he ran without looking where he was going and entered thick thorn bushes nearby. Peng Zhanglao valued his life more than a few stabbing pain from the thorns, so he went even

deeper into the bush. The pair of eagles still did not want to let him go, they circled above the thorn bushes.

“He has lost one eye, just let him go,” Guo Jing called his pair of eagles. Suddenly he heard a baby’s noise among the thick patch of grass nearby. “Ah!” Guo Jing cried. Quickly he dismounted his horse and parted the grass only to see a baby sat on the ground. Next to that baby he saw a pair of a woman’s feet. He parted the grass further and saw a woman wearing dark green clothing was fainted on the ground. It was none other than Mu Nianci.

Huang Rong was pleasantly surprised, “Mu Jiejie [Elder sister]!” she cried; then she stoop down to help her up. Guo Jing carried the baby in his arms. The baby’s bright eyes were staring at him intently, they did not show any sign of fear at all.

Huang Rong massaged several acupoints on Mu Nianci’s upper body; then she also pinched the acupoint next to her nose. Mu Nianci slowly regained her consciousness; she opened her eyes and saw these couple. She thought she was dreaming, “You ... you are Guo Dage [eldest brother Guo] ... Huang Jia Meizi [younger sister from the Huang family] ...”

“Sister Mu, why are you here? Are you injured?” Guo Jing asked.

Mu Nianci struggled to stand up, but she fell down again; turned out her hands and feet were bound by pieces of ropes. Huang Rong quickly took her dagger out and cut the ropes. Mu Nianci quickly took the baby from Guo Jing’s arms. After calming down herself for half a day bashfully she started to recount what had happened to her.

Turned out Mu Nianci lost her chastity to Yang Kang at the Iron Palm Peak, and she was pregnant. She had hoped to

return to her hometown at Lin'an, but when she reached Zhangrao she was too weak to continue; so she found an empty hut in the forest and took a rest. Not too long afterwards she gave birth to a baby boy. Since she had no desire to see other people, she stayed in the forest, hunting and picking up wild fruits to survive. Luckily the baby boy was so smart, so she was comforted amidst her suffering and loneliness. That particular day she took the baby out to gather some fire woods, unfortunately they met with Peng Zhanglao. Seeing her beauty Peng Zhanglao wanted to rape her. Mu Nianci's martial art was not weak, but Peng Zhanglao was one of the four Elders of the Beggar Clan; he was the peer of Lu Youjiao Zhanglao; second only to the Bangzhu [Clan Leader], Hong Qigong. Naturally Mu Nianci was not his match. She was subdued easily and her hands and feet bound. In her anger and desperation she passed out. If Jing and Rong, two people did not arrive at this exact moment, and with their sharp eyes their pair of eagles spotted their common enemy, Mu Nianci would suffer a terrible fate, molested and disgraced by this evil man.

That evening Jing and Rong spent the night at Mu Nianci's hut. When Huang Rong told her that Yang Kang had died at the Temple of the Iron Spear in Jiaying, Mu Nianci's tears came down like rain. Huang Rong understood the depth of her love to him, so Huang Rong did not dare to tell her the details surrounding his death; she only said that Yang Kang was poisoned by Ouyang Feng. "I did not lie, didn't he die because of Ouyang Feng's snake venom?" she said in her heart.

Guo Jing saw the boy was handsome, he recalled how he became sworn brothers with Yang Kang, could not refrain from heaving a deep sigh.

Amidst her tears Mu Nianci said, "Guo Dage, would you give this child a name, please?"

Guo Jing thought for a moment, then said, "His father and I were sworn brothers; it's a pity he did not finish well. I regretted the fact that I was not able to fulfill my responsibility to steer him from his wrong way of life. I hope when he grows up this child will cross over/change ('guo') the mistakes and correct ('gai') them; he will uphold justice and righteousness with all his might. I am giving him the name Yang Guo, alias Gaizhi; is it all right with you?"

Mu Nianci thanked him and said, "I hope it would be like just what Guo Dage said."

Early the next morning Guo Jing and Huang Rong presented Mu Nianci not a few silver 'liang's to help them, mother and son, to pass the days. Guo Jing urged her to return to Lin'an; but Mu Nianci shook her head. A moment later she softly said, "We, mother and son, are going to the Temple of the Iron Spear in Jiaying so he can see his father's grave."

Three people bid farewell to each other and Guo Jing and Huang Rong left with heavy hearts.

Two people headed west and arrived at the Hunan-Hubei border, then they turned north and in less than a day they arrived at Xiangyang. They saw the people were calm, the city was prosperous, there was no sign of any military activity; they knew the great Mongolian army had not arrived, they were relieved.

Xiangyang was an important city located on the northern border of the Southern Song Dynasty. It was under the authority of a garrison commander in charge of the troop to defend the border. Guo Jing thought the situation is critical, so without trying to find any inn they went directly to the Commander Lu Wende's official residence.

This commander was in charge of the whole garrison, he was a high-ranking officer. Even though Guo Jing was a marshal in the Mongolian army, but in the Southern Song Dynasty he was a nobody. How could he seek audience with a high-ranking officer just like that?

Huang Rong knew that money solved everything, so she gave a 'liang' of gold to the receptionist. Immediately the receptionist treated them nicely; he looked happy, but still could not guarantee audience that very same day. He said that the earliest opportunity would be half a month away; even then he could not guarantee the commander would be willing to receive Guo Jing.

Guo Jing's temper flared, "This is an urgent military situation, how can I wait?" he shouted.

Huang Rong quickly cast a meaningful glance toward him, pulled him to the side and whispered, "We'll come back tonight."

They found a temporary lodging, waited until the second hour that night and using their lightness kungfu they went to the commander's mansion. Commander Lu Wende was having a private party, he hired some professional female entertainer and was having fun with his concubines. Guo and Huang two people jumped down from the roof. Guo Jing cupped his fists, "Xiao Ren [little/lowly people] has an urgent military matter to report," he said.

Lu Wende was startled, "Assassin!" he shouted; shoving the female entertainers away he went hiding underneath the table.

Guo Jing stepped forward in big strides and said, "Commander, please calm down. Xiao Ren does not have any ill intention toward you." He pulled the commander back to his seat.

Lu Wende's face was pale, he kept trembling. Then he saw dozen or so soldiers with their swords and spears ready to rescue him. Huang Rong immediately took out her dagger and pointed it toward Lu Wende's chest. The soldiers yelling and shouting loudly, but nobody dared to go forward. "Tell them to shut up, we have something to say to you," Huang Rong said.

Lu Wende was still trembling all over, he signaled the soldiers to be quiet. Guo Jing silently sighed seeing the man who held authority over the troop with a heavy responsibility to guard against the enemy was such a useless fool. He reported that the Mongolian army was going to attack Xiangyang and asked the commander to deploy troops immediately and arranged the necessary defense.

In his heart Lu Wende did not believe him at all, but his mouth repeatedly said yes. Huang Rong saw he kept trembling, "Did you hear what he said?" she asked.

"I did ... I heard," Lu Wende answered.

"What did you hear?" Huang Rong pressed.

"That ... that the Jin army are planning a sneak attack, must arrange defense, must arrange defense," Lu Wende mumbled.

Huang Rong was angry, "It's the Mongolian army, not the Jins!" she said.

Lu Wende was scared out of his wits, "Mongolian army? That's impossible, that's impossible. The Mongolians have signed an agreement with our minister to fight the Jins together; they won't breach that agreement."

Huang Rong was really angry, "I said the Mongolian army! It is the Mongolian army!"

Lu Wende repeatedly nodded his head, "If Miss says it is the Mongolian army, then it is Mongolian army."

"The whole country and the people's lives are in the hand of 'Da Ren' [lit. big person - common term for government official]. Xiangyang is the Southern Song's first defense, Da Ren must really care about it," Guo Jing said.

"Right, right," Lu Wende said, "What 'lao xiong' ['old chap'] said was absolutely right."

Jing and Rong two people sighed. They leaped over the wall and went out, amidst the chaotic shouting, "Catch the assassins! Catch the assassins!"

Two people waited for two more days, but did not see any increased activity on the city wall at all. "This Commander is to be cursed!" Guo Jing said, "Father-in-law was right, I'd better kill him and think about something later."

"The enemy will arrive within the next few days," Huang Rong said, "Killing this dog government official is not enough. The city will certainly be chaotic, the troops will not have anybody to lead them; it will be difficult to fight the enemy."

Guo Jing creased his brows, "Then, what do we do?"

Huang Rong hesitated, "The 'zuo zhuan' [lit. left biography] has a story called 'xian gao kao shi' [Xian Gao presenting a gift to an army]. We might be able to follow this example."

Guo Jing was delighted, "Rong'er, reading books truly brings endless wonders. What story was that? Quickly narrate it for me. Can we do it?"

Huang Rong said, "We can do it, but it all depends on your body."

Guo Jing was puzzled, "What?"

Huang Rong did not answer, but she softly laughed.

A moment later she continued, "Very well, I'll narrate the story for you to hear. During the 'chun qiu' period [spring and autumn, ca. 770-476 BC] in the Zheng country there was a merchant whose name was Xian Gao. While doing business out of town he came across the Qin army who was going to attack the Zheng country. That time the Zhengs were not prepared, therefore, if the Qins attacked they would surely perish. Even though Xian Gao was a businessman he was also a patriot. He cooked up a plan. He dispatched a courier traveling at night to alert his country, while he himself prepared twelve oxen and requested an audience with the enemy's general. He said he represented the Zheng government to present a gift for the Qin army. The Qin's army general thought that the Zheng had already prepared to battle; he did not dare to proceed and pulled the army back to their own country."

Guo Jing was delighted, "That was a wonderful story; but what does it have to do with my body?" he asked.

Huang Rong laughed, "Didn't he use twelve oxen? Your zodiac is the ox, isn't it?"

Guo Jing threw his hands in desperation, "Good! You used a story to indirectly curse me." He stretched his fingers to tickle Huang Rong. Huang Rong laughed and ran away.

After having a good laugh, Huang Rong said, "Tonight we'll plunder the Commander's residence for gold and precious jewels. Tomorrow I will disguise myself as a male government officer and welcome the great army of



Mongolia. We'll see whether we can deceive them to withdraw their troops."

Guo Jing applauded.

That very evening two people plundered the Commander's mansion. They found Lu Wende had amassed riches as high as a mountain. They took away a large amount of gold and jewels plus a set of government official's costume; while the people inside the mansion slumbered.

Huang Rong dressed herself in the costume and she was transformed into a handsome high-ranking officer. Taking the gold and jewelry she rode the little red horse headed north.

Guo Jing was waiting for the news from Huang Rong outside the north gate about mid-day on the second day when he saw the little red horse came galloping fast; dust flying behind. Huang Rong pulled the rein; her face was ashen. With a trembling voice she said, "The Mongolian army is more than a hundred thousand strong; how can we fight them?"

Guo Jing was shocked! "That many?" he muttered.

"Looked like Genghis Khan has determined to crush the Southern Song in one swoop," Huang Rong said, "I presented the gift to the commander of their vanguard regiment. He did not know that we are already aware of their real intention; he said they were going to attack the Jins and not the Songs. When I told him point blankly he was startled and immediately held their movement and sent words to their general."

"It certainly is best if they decided to withdraw, but I am afraid ... I am afraid ...," Guo Jing said.

Huang Rong raised her beautiful eyebrows. "Judging from their preparation, they won't withdraw that easily."

"Can you think of another wonderful idea?" Guo Jing asked.

Huang Rong shook her head. "I have racked my brain for a whole day and a whole night. Brother Jing, if we fight one on one, there are probably only two or three people in the world that can defeat you; even if the enemy is ten or a hundred men strong, we won't be deterred by them; but the enemy is thousands, tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands strong; what can we do?"

Guo Jing heaved a deep sigh. "Our Great Song people are actually dozens times more than the Mongolians. If all the millions people are all of one mind; why would we fear the Mongolian army? It's a pity our government officials are cowards and fools; that the people have to suffer."

"The Mongolians are not here yet; even if they were, we can always kill some of them. If the situation becomes really critical we can still depend on the little red horse to escape. The anxiety of this world is enough to burden us down," Huang Rong said.

Guo Jing's expression changed, "Rong'er, please don't say such a thing. Both of us have already learned the art of war from the book 'Wu Mu' [General Yue Fei] left behind; how can we forget Yue Wu Mu's teachings, 'jin zhong bao guo' [with utmost loyalty serving the country]? Even though the two of us won't make significant contribution, but we must dedicate our lives to defend the country with all of our might. Even if we have to lay down our lives here, we won't let our parents' and masters' upbringing in vain."

Huang Rong sighed, "I knew early on that it would be difficult to avoid a day like this. All right! You live I live, you die I will also die!"

Once these two made a decision, their hearts were peaceful. They returned to their lodging immediately, drinking and chatting. They knew the enemy was threatening the border; they knew they might part forever, so they felt closer than in the previous days.

They were drinking until about the second hour that evening, when suddenly a commotion outside the city wall was heard. It was so loud and sounded really bad. "They are here!" Huang Rong called out.

Two people jumped and rushed to the top of the city wall to see outside the city thousands of refugees had arrived; young and old, endless streams of people rushing to the city. Who would have expected that the captain of the guards had ordered the soldiers to shut the gate tightly; not allowing the refugees to enter the city? Not too long afterwards Lu Wende sent reinforcement with bows and arrows. They started shooting toward the refugees, forcing them to withdraw from the city wall.

"The Mongolian soldiers come and kill us!" the refugees loudly shout. But the captain did not open the gate. The refugees under the city wall cried and screamed, their voices shook the sky.

Jing and Rong two people stood atop the city wall; they looked as far as their eyes could see, and saw in the distant a column of torches flickering in the wind coming near. The vanguard regiment of the Mongolian army had arrived.

Guo Jing had served under the Genghis Khan for quite a while. He knew that the Mongolian's tactic to break city walls was forcing refugees to flee into the city and attack as soon as the city gate was open. Guo Jing saw tens of thousands of refugees gathered around the city gate; as

soon as the army arrived, they would kill everybody, outside and inside the Xiangyang's city wall.

In this critical moment Guo Jing made up his mind. He stood on top of the city wall, he raised his arm and loudly shouted, "If the Mongolian army breaks Xiangyang's wall, nobody will live. Men of valor, quickly follow me to kill the enemy!"

The captain of the guards at the north gate was one of Lu Wende's trusted aides; hearing Guo Jing's shout he was angry, "A traitor trying to trouble people's mind; arrest him!"

Guo Jing leaped down from the top of the city wall; stretching his right arm he grabbed the captain's chest, lifted his body up and mounted his horse.

There were many patriots among the soldiers and people of the Central Plains. They saw how the refugees were crying bitterly outside the city wall; they were indignant. This time Guo Jing grabbed the captain they could not help but feel pleasantly surprised; obviously nobody went forward to rescue the captain.

Guo Jing barked his order, "Quick, tell the soldiers to open the gate!"

The captain was a coward; he had no alternative but to comply. The north gate was opened, and the refugees came flooding in.

Guo Jing handed out the captain to Huang Rong while he himself took a spear and went out of the city gate on the horse back. "Wait!" Huang Rong called. She took the captain's helmet and armor and put them on Guo Jing. "Use a fake imperial decree; command the troop to go out of the city," she whispered in Guo Jing's ear. With the back of her

hand Huang Rong struck the captain's acupoint and threw him by the city gate.

Guo Jing thought it was a great idea, so he shouted loud and clear, "Hear the imperial decree: Due to his incapability, the Garrison Commander Lu Wende is removed from his duty. The army is to follow me going out of the city and fight the enemy." His speech was supported by profound internal strength; so that although the city was in chaos but his voice was clearly heard above the clamoring people. For a brief moment everybody was quiet. In this panic-stricken situation who could differentiate whether the decree was real or not? Almost everybody in the army, from top to bottom, did not hold Lu Wende in high regard; they knew he was a coward, afraid of death. This time a powerful enemy was threatening their border. In this time of panic suddenly hearing that the corrupt official is being removed from his office and somebody stepping up to lead them to face the enemy, they were cheering with one voice.

Guo Jing lead about six, seven thousands of infantry and cavalry troops going out of the city. They were not observing military discipline, the troop was scattered in disorder; how could they be compared to the refined Mongolian army?

Guo Jing recalled Yue Fei's book had this principle, 'in a critical situation, use unconventional tactic', he ordered over three thousands soldiers and their sergeants to hide on the eastern hillside; as they heard the canon once, they were to shout at the top of their lungs, raising and waving flags, but did not go out to fight the enemy. Then he ordered another three thousands soldiers and their sergeants to hide on the western hillside; as they heard the canon twice, they were to do the same.

Both companies could see Guo Jing's confidence, giving up orders with ease and competence; they accepted the command and went to their respective positions.

It was already dawn when the entire refugees had entered the city. They heard the drums and the battle cry, the sound of iron horseshoes treading on the ground. They also saw the dust rising from the earth; the vanguard regiment of Mongolian army had arrived at the city wall.

Huang Rong had also donned battle armor; mounting on a horse she took a spear and rode next to Guo Jing to face death. Guo Jing gave his order loud and clear, "Open wide all four city gates! Everybody in the city hide inside the houses. Whoever dares to come out will be beheaded immediately!"

Actually he did not need to issue this order; early on everybody in the city had disappeared into the houses, while the brave soldiers had positioned themselves on the east and western hillsides. Lu Wende hid underneath a table, busily read his prayers with a trembling voice.

Hundreds of Mongolian cavalry galloped like the wind spreading out along the city wall; they saw Xiangyang's city gate was wide open and a pair of young people, a man and a woman, on horsebacks with spears in their hands. Their horses stood in front of the hanging bridge across the moat.

The vanguard regiment's 'qian fu zhang' [leader of a thousand unit] felt strange; he did not dare to proceed without authorization. Quickly he dispatched a messenger to the 'wan fu zhang' [leader of a ten thousand unit]. The 'wan fu zhang' was a veteran; listening to this strange report he rode his horse to the city wall. When he saw Guo Jing he was shocked. He had joined the expedition to the west, time and again he had seen Guo Jing's strange and

wonderful tactics in battle. Guo Jing's troops were invincible. His paratroopers flying down and breaking Samarkhand defense was a legend, making Guo Jing the object of full admiration of the whole Mongolian army; as a matter of fact, his accomplishments were still the talk of the troops. This time he saw Guo Jing was standing in front of the city, while the city looked empty and deserted; how could he dare to attack? Immediately he dismounted his horse, raised his hands in salute and called out, "Jin dao fu ma [golden blade consort], your subordinate pays his respect."

Guo Jing returned his salute, but did not say anything. That 'wan fu zhang' withdrew and flew to report to his commander-in-chief. About an hour or so later a group of riders bearing a large military banner came near; a young looking general came forward to the bridge. It was the Fourth Prince Tuolei. He shouted, "Guo Jing Anda [Mongolian term for sworn brother], how are you?"

Guo Jing moved his horse forward and said, "Tuolei Anda, so it is you?"

Whenever these two sworn brothers met in the past, they would always hugged each other in delight, but this time both of them held their horses' reins when they were still about five 'zhang's [about 50 feet or 15 meters] apart as if they had a prior agreement.

"Anda, you are leading your troop to attack my Great Song, are you not?" Guo Jing asked.

"I bear my 'fu huang's [Emperor Father] decree, I don't have liberty. I ask for your forgiveness," Tuolei replied.

Guo Jing swept his gaze across the field; he saw flags fluttering like clouds, the blades gleaming white like snow; he did not know for sure how many soldiers were there.

"Once this cavalry attacks, I, Guo Jing, will give up my life," he thought. With a clear voice he said, "Very well! Then go ahead and take my life!"

Tuolei was taken aback, he mused, "This man commands an army like a deity, truly I am not his match; much less he and I are as close as flesh and blood brothers. How could I injure this sworn brother's relationship?" He hesitated and did not know what to do.

Huang Rong turned her head and signaled with her right hand. Immediately the soldiers in the city shot a canon. As soon as they heard the canon, the soldiers on the eastern hillside raised their voices and waved their flags. Tuolei's face changed. The canon was shot again, and the soldiers on the western hillside were also shouting loudly. Tuolei thought, "Not good! I fell into his ambush."

Tulei had served under Genghis Khan fighting to the east and attacking to the west; he had been in countless battles. What major battle he had not seen? How could this little ambush by several thousands soldiers scare him? It was because during the expedition to the west Guo Jing had demonstrated wonderful and strange warfare. Tuolei was already scared of Guo Jing. Now he saw the situation was unusual, he was afraid he might fall into Guo Jing's trap. He gave an order for his troops to withdraw about thirty 'li's and pitched a camp there.

Seeing the Mongolian army retreat, Guo Jing and Huang Rong looked at each other and smiled. "Jing Gege, congratulations on your empty city tactic."

Guo Jing smiled, but his face still showed anxiety, he said, "Tuolei is smart and brave. He retreated today, but he will be back tomorrow. How would we fight him?"



Huang Rong hesitated for half a day before opened her mouth, "I have an idea, but I am afraid you love your sworn brother too much and will not be willing to do it."

Guo Jing's heart turned cold, "You want me to assassinate him?" he asked.

"He is the youngest and most beloved son of the Great Khan," Huang Rong replied, "Unlike other senior generals, he holds incomparable honors. If the Fourth Prince dies, the troops will retreat immediately."

Guo Jing lowered his head without saying anything; they turned back and entered the city. Seeing the enemy retreat, the troops marched back to the city, still in disorderly manner. Lu Wende heard how Guo Jing made the enemy retreat simply by talking; he was overjoyed and immediately paid two people a visit at their lodgings, inviting them back to his mansion for a drink.

Guo Jing wanted to discuss city defense with him, but as soon as Lu Wende heard that the Mongolian army would be back the next day his knees weakened and he was speechless for half a day. When he finally opened his mouth what he said was, "Prepare a sedan chair, I am going home. Prepare a sedan chair, I am going home." He determined to abandon the city and head south that very same night.

Guo Jing was very depressed, he could not eat. The sky gradually darkened. He heard people crying all over the city. He was afraid that by this time the next day there wouldn't be a single living Great Song people in Xiangyang. He had seen not a few times where the Mongolian troops were on a killing spree, washing the city wall they subdued with the blood of the people. He could never take the massacre of the people of Samarkhand out of his mind. "Crack!" he slapped the table with his palm and shouted,

“Rong’er, the people of old sacrificed their own family for the country; today how can I concern myself with sworn brotherhood?”

Huang Rong sighed, “This is actually a very difficult matter.”

As soon as his mind was made up, Guo Jing changed into night clothing. Together with Huang Rong they rode the little red horse toward the Mongolian camp. They stopped at a hill nearby to leave the red horse then walked the rest of the way, looking for Tuolei’s tent.

They caught two night watch guards, sealed their acupoints, and donned their uniforms. Guo Jing grew up among the Mongolian warriors; he spoke their language, and was familiar with Mongolian army regulations; so without too much effort they found the big tent where Tuolei slept.

It was a pitch black night; two people crouched down behind the big tent, peeking inside through the tent seams. They saw Tuolei was pacing back and forth, his face gloomy. Tuolei was muttering, “Guo Jing, Anda! Anda, Guo Jing.”

Guo Jing was startled; he thought his presence had been detected. He almost opened his mouth to answer when Huang Rong, who had anticipated early on what would happen, immediately covered his mouth with her hand. Guo Jing silently cursed his own stupidity, he felt partly funny, partly mad at himself.

Huang Rong whispered in his ear, “Do it now, a real man takes the bull by the horns; wavering is useless.”

Right at that moment they heard a distant sound of horse hoof galloping fast; the sound was getting closer as the rider came toward the big tent. Guo Jing knew it was an

urgent military dispatch, so he bent back down and whispered in Huang Rong's ear, "I want to listen to the military situation, it won't be too late to kill him later."

They saw the messenger dressed in yellow dismount his horse and enter the tent. He bowed to Tuolei, "Fourth Prince, a message from the Great Khan," he said.

"What did the Great Khan say?" Tuolei asked. The messenger bent his knees and started to sing. The Mongolian culture had not been developed too long; although they had written words, Genghis Khan was not literate; he could neither read nor write. The decree would be issued orally; and to avoid mistakes in the transmission, oftentimes the decree was made into a song which the messenger memorized and recited over and over along the way before finally delivering it to the recipient.

The messenger only sang three lines when Toulei and Guo Jing were both shocked; Tuolei even shed some tears. It turned out that after the expedition to the west Genghis Khan got sick; for the last few days he got worse, sometimes he lost consciousness. He summoned Tuolei to go back home as soon as he could. At the end of his message he said that he missed Guo Jing very much; and if Tuolei in the south knew his whereabouts, to invite him back north and bade farewell with the Great Khan. Khan had pardoned every single offense he had committed.

Listening to this part Guo Jing used his dagger to rip open the tent. He jumped in and called out, "Tuolei Anda, I am coming with you."

Tuolei was startled, but seeing it was Guo Jing his delight was unspeakable. Finally they both hugged each other.

The messenger recognized Guo Jing, he stepped forward and kneeled in front of Guo Jing and said, "Jin dao fu ma,

the Great Khan requested you come to the Golden Tent to see him.”

Hearing the messenger still called him ‘jin dao fu ma’ Guo Jing was anxious for fear that Huang Rong would make a big deal out of it. Immediately he jumped out through the rip on the tent and pull Huang Rong’s hand, “Rong’er, you and I will go together and return together.”

Huang Rong lowered her head but did not say anything.

“Don’t you believe me?” Guo Jing nervously asked.

Huang Rong smiled sweetly, “If you are still thinking of becoming ‘fu ma’ or ‘fu niu’ [fu ma – consort, ma – horse, niu – cow], I’ll kill you with this dagger.”

That very evening Tuolei issued an order to withdraw the army; they would be leaving at daybreak.

Guo Jing and Huang Rong went back to get the red horse and their pair of eagles, ready to leave with the army heading north the next morning.

Tuolei was afraid he would not be able to see his father, so he delegated his command to his second in command, while he himself sped up north with Guo Jing and Huang Rong.

In less than a month they had arrived at Genghis Khan’s golden tent. From the distant Tuolei saw in front of the golden tent nine big banners were still fluttering in the wind. He knew the Khan was still well; he shouted in joy and urged the horse to run faster.

Guo Jing held his rein. He recalled Khan’s generosity in raising him up; yet the same Khan had caused the tragic death of his mother. He loved and hated Khan at the same time. He lowered his head and did not say anything.

Suddenly he heard the bugle being sounded, two rows of Khan's personal guards lined up in front of the Golden Tent. Genghis Khan, wearing a black eagle's feather coat, walked out in big strides supported by Tuolei's shoulder. His footsteps were as majestic as in days past, but he was trembling slightly.

Guo Jing rushed forward and kneeled down. Genghis Khan's eyes were brimming with tears, with a trembling voice he said, "Get up, get up! I am thinking of you every day."

Guo Jing stood up. He saw the Great Khan's face was full of wrinkles; his cheeks were deep, it looked like his days in this world were numbered. Suddenly he felt he did not hate Khan that much anymore.

Genghis Khan placed his other hand on Guo Jing's left shoulder. He looked at Tuolei, then at Guo Jing, and heaved a deep sigh. He lifted up his eyes to the distant desert and stood silent, lost in thought. Guo Jing and Tuolei did not know what he was thinking, they did not dare to make any noise.

After a long time Genghis Khan sighed, "A long time ago Anda Jamuqa and I became sworn brothers; who would have thought that there came a day when I had no choice but to kill him. I have become the Great Khan; he died under my own hands. A few more days and what difference will we have? Won't I be the same with him, return to the yellow dirt? Who succeeds and who fails, in the end what difference does it make?" Tapping both men's shoulders he continued, "You two have to live in harmony from the beginning to the end; don't ever think of killing each other. Anda Jamuqa had died, the matter between us is finished; but every time I remembered our brotherhood, many, many nights I could not close my eyes to sleep."

Tuolei and Guo Jing remembered how they almost killed each other outside the Xiangyang's city gate, they were secretly ashamed.

After standing up for a while Genghis Khan felt tired. He was about to return to his tent when suddenly a small group of riders approached fast. The one in the front wore a white robe with a golden belt on his waist. As soon as Genghis Khan saw his enemy, his spirit rose.

The men held their reins quite a distance away, dismounted their horses and anxiously stepped forward. They kneeled on the ground from a far, did not dare to approach at all. Respectfully the leader said, "The Jin emissary seeks an audience with the Great Khan."

"The Jin is not willing to surrender, what does it want by sending someone to see me?" Genghis Khan angrily asked.

That emissary bowed to the ground and said, "Our lowly country realized that we have been too bold; offending the divine power of the Great Khan; a crime deserving death. We are offering one thousand pearls to appease the Great Khan's anger; we are asking the Great Khan to pardon our sins. These thousand pearls are our country's heritage treasure; we earnestly hope the Great Khan would accept this humble gift." The emissary took a big bundle from his back, produced a jade tray, and again from his sack poured innumerable pearls onto the tray. He knelt on the ground and lifted the tray high above his head with both hands.

Genghis Khan slightly squinted and looked at the pearls; those were big pearls, about the size of a fingertip each, surrounding a giant pearl in the middle of the tray. Just one pearl would worth a fortune, let alone a thousand of them. Except for the giant pearl in the middle, the rest of them were roughly of the same size. The pearls were gleaming

brilliantly under the sun light; there was a layer of rainbow-like light above the jade tray.

On a normal day Genghis Khan would love this kind of gift; but that particular day he only raised his eyebrows and to his personal guard said, "Take it." The personal guard took the jade tray.

Seeing the Great Khan accepted the gift, the emissary's joy was unbounded. He said, "The Great Khan has accepted our humble gift; our lowly nation, from the ruler to the people, are very grateful."

Genghis Khan was indignant, "Who said I accept your gift? I am going to dispatch my army to attack the Jin dogs left and right. Seize him!" His personal guards immediately surrounded the emissary and his men.

"Even if there are a thousand more pearls, it is still difficult for me to live longer!" Genghis Khan sighed. He took the jade tray from his guard and threw everything high in the air; the pearls scattered everywhere. Everybody was startled.

Many of these pearls were later picked up by the Mongolian soldiers and people; but many more were still hidden among the tall grass that hundreds of years later lucky herdsman would find them.

Genghis Khan was indifferent, he returned to his tent.

That evening just before dusk he told Guo Jing to accompany him for a stroll along the prairie. Two people on horseback had ridden for about a dozen of 'li's when they heard the cry of eagles high above their heads. They looked up and saw Guo Jing's pair of eagles circling in the air. Genghis Khan fetched his iron bow and aimed the arrow toward the female eagle.

“Great Khan, don’t shoot!” Guo Jing cried out in alarm.

Although Genghis Khan was feeble, his hand was still quick; by the time Guo Jing cried, the arrow had already left the bow. Guo Jing secretly groaned, he was fully aware that Genghis Khan had an outstanding physical strength. Once the arrow left his bow his beloved eagle would be killed for sure. Who would have thought that the eagle was able to skew itself and sweep its wing to strike the arrow. The male eagle was angry, it let out a long cry and dived to strike Genghis Khan’s head.

“Eagle, you want to die?” Guo Jing barked and raised his whip to hit the male eagle. The male eagle saw its master was angry flew back to the sky, letting out a loud cry a pair of eagles soared to the sky.

Genghis Khan was dejected, he threw his bow and arrow to the ground and sadly said, “For dozens of years this is the first time I could not shoot an eagle down; I guess my time is drawing really near.”

Guo Jing wanted to console him but actually he did not know anything good to say. Suddenly Genghis Khan kicked his legs and his horse sped to the north. Guo Jing was afraid he would be lost, so he urged his horse to follow. The little red horse ran like the wind and in a blink of an eye they caught up with the Great Khan.

Genghis Khan held his rein; looking at all direction he suddenly said, “Jing’er, I built this great country; no other dynasty, past or future, can match its splendor. It will take one full year to travel from the center of my kingdom to the outermost part of it, east, west, south and north. Tell me, among the heroes of the world, who achieved more than I do?”



Guo Jing hesitated a moment before answering, "Great Khan's accomplishment is exceptional, no one can match it since time immemorial. However, for Great Khan one person to achieve this level of awe-inspiring power, I don't know how many bones have been piled up, how many orphans and widows out there, and how many tears have been shed?"

Genghis Khan's eyebrows were raised. He lifted his horsewhip high, ready to strike Guo Jing's head; but seeing Guo Jing imposingly looking at him without any trace of fear in his eyes, his whip stopped midair. He roared, "What did you say?"

Guo Jing said in his heart, "After today the days for me to say goodbye to the Great Khan are numbered; even if I provoke him to anger I have to make him understand what's in my heart." Therefore, fearlessly he said, "Great Khan, you raised me up and taught me, yet you also caused my mother's tragic death. This is personal grudge and gratitude; let us not talk about it. I only want to ask you: when somebody died and buried, how much land would he occupy?"

Genghis Khan was startled, but he answered anyway, "About this big," he made a circle with his whip.

Guo Jing said, "That's right. Then you killed so many people, shed so much blood, and invaded so many countries; in the end, what's the use of all that?"

Genghis Khan was silent.

Guo Jing continued, "The true measure of a real hero, the one admired by the future generation, is how much he did for the benefit of his people; who always seek the good of the common people. In my opinion, someone who killed

many people is not necessarily a hero." [Translator's note: the word 'hero' here is 'ying xiong'.]

"Are you saying that in all my life I did not do a single good deed?" Genghis Khan asked.

"Good deeds, certainly there are many, but you attacked the south and conquered the west, piling dead bodies like a mountain. Whether that act could be considered right or wrong, might be very difficult to say," Guo Jing answered. His natural disposition was simple and straightforward, he said what was in his heart.

All of his life Genghis Khan was a conceited man, nobody dared to tell him anything. This time he was scolded by a youngster, worse yet, he found it difficult to refute what Guo Jing had said. He looked back to his past, also looked around him on the horseback. He felt something is suddenly taken away from him. Half a day later, 'wah!' he spurted fresh blood to the ground.

Guo Jing was scared, he realized his tongue had been too sharp; busily he held out his hand to support the Khan and said, "Great Khan, let's go back and rest. I have been too bold and affronted you, I beg for your forgiveness."

Genghis Khan gave a slight wry smile, his face was pale like a yellow wax, he sighed, "Among the people around me, there is none who is as bold as you are, dare to tell me what you really think in your heart." Immediately his eyebrows were raised, put an arrogant face and proudly said, "I have wandered back and fro over the earth, crushing countless countries, yet in your opinion I can't be counted as a hero? Hey! It truly is childish talk!" He raised his whip and struck his horse's back, speeding back to his tent.

That very evening Genghis Khan collapsed inside his Golden Tent. Just before he died he mumbled, "Hero ... hero ..."

Apparently he had been pondering in his heart what Guo Jing had said earlier.

Guo Jing and Huang Rong paid their final respect to the Great Khan; and after bidding Tuolei farewell, they headed south that very same day.

Along the way two people saw the white bones that were scattered among the tall grass of the prairie; they could not refrain from lamenting incessantly; both were thinking that the two of them loved each other, they would live harmoniously, they did not have any regrets; yet the common people's misery was deep; they did not know the day peace and prosperity would reign on earth. It was as written:

*After the soldiers and fire become ashes,  
Only then the poor village sprouting families.  
No one's to know when the war is over,  
Until they are buried in the cold sand under the  
waning moon.*

**(The end of the entire book.** The narration of Guo Jing, Huang Rong, and the others' accomplishment is continued in the 'Divine Eagle, Gallant Knight'.)

**THE END**